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**VASSANJI'S NO NEW LAND: A SAGA OF GLOBAL  
UPROOTEDNESS**

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**Abstract:**

*No New Land* is Vassanji's second work of fiction. It is a moving tale of the immigrant experience. It presents a rich description of a transplanted community. Here Vassanji appears as a keen observer of lives caught between one world and another. The novelist illustrates the fate of the Asian Africans in Canada. As a keen observer he portrays how the immigrants are victimised. Here the author explores through the characters the psyche of rootless, frightened and insecure minority immigrants who are pitted against the hypocrite fanatic majority. He wants to draw the attention of the readers on the themes of exile, alienation, memory, nostalgia, identity, race, culture, tradition and community.

What distinguishes Vassanji's work from that of other diasporic writers is its vibrant, affectionate depiction of the double migration of his South Asian characters? At the centre of Vassanji's fiction is the Indian Shamsi community. The members of this community make their first voyage to East Africa in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century as part of the labour mobility within the British Empire, working as semi skilled labourers, small traders, and junior colonial functionaries. Starting out as shopkeepers and businessmen settling on the coast of British East Africa and German East Africa, they possessed the necessary linguistic and political inside knowledge to assist the colonial administration in ruling an inaccessible and unruly hinterland. Their role as marginal men lent them the flexibility to operate as cultural translators and function as "a buffer zone between the indigenous Africans and the colonial administration."<sup>1</sup>

In postcolonial times, the position of the Indian communities in East Africa became untenable. The postcolonial regime marginalized the Asians of East Africa. With the nationalisation of rental properties, the Asians of East Africa were forced into the international diaspora. The second voyage begins in the sixties from postcolonial Africa toward Europe and North America. As vassanji's narrative indicates, this second wave of migration by his characters is prompted by racial tension (between native Africans and those of South Asian

ancestry) and socio-economic changes as the now mostly South Asian community finds its privileges radically curtailed or threatened with the rise of African nationalism.

This saga of global uprootedness and unstable migration is dramatised in Vassanji's *No New Land*. Here the novelist illustrates the fate of the Asian Africans in Canada. The characters of this novel try to chase the mirage of a world that has walls of gold, pillars of silver and floors that smell of musk. But the reality they face is very harsh and awful, and finally they realise that Canada cannot appear as a new land. Like a keen observer Vassanji portrays how the immigrants are victimised; still they have no option except to keep on living there and discovering something more of Canada everyday, but finally they feel:

We are but creatures neither of our origins, and however stalwarts we march forward, paving new roads, seeking new worlds, and the ghosts from our pasts stand nor far behind and are not easily shaken off.<sup>2</sup>

In *No New Land* Vassanji, portraying different incidents caused by racial discrimination, explores through the characters the psyche of rootless, frightened and insecure minority immigrants who are pitted against the hypocrite fanatic majority. He wants to draw the attention of the readers on the themes of exile, alienation, memory, nostalgia, identity, race, culture, tradition and community.

The novel, *No New Land*, opens in Canada, with the Lalani family shown in the grips of a big tension and panic because Nurdin Lalani, the head of the family, has not come back home from work. Nurdin and his family had come from Africa and settled down at Toronto. The family of the protagonist Nurdin Lalani is a double immigrant family -- Asia to Africa to Canada. The novel moves in flashback of incidents and events.

After Hazi Lalani had died and his business sunk, someone whispered the word -- Canada. Many families were flying to Canada for better prospects and to become rich. Roshan, the sister of Nurdin's wife, urges the Lalani family to come to Canada. And the family takes a flight to London. The situation of Nurdin in the plane becomes an objective correlative and also it predicts the predicaments he has to suffer in Canada. With his family Nurdin is on the night plane. The plane has magical lights. The magical light of the plane is but the light of Nurdin's mind and the night serves as the prediction of the problems he is going to face in

Canada. At London airport, the immigration officers shatter their dream to halt and see London. At this Nurdin could do nothing except calling them “The bastards?”<sup>3</sup>

At Toronto airport, Roshan and her husband receive the Lalanis. Roshan gives them a pack of chewing gum saying, “This is Canada.”<sup>4</sup> In a way Roshan tells all about the ‘multiculturalism’<sup>5</sup> of Canada in a symbolic way. You go on struggling against the problems that never come to an end like a chewing gum. If you want to get rid of this chewing gum you cannot throw it out of your mouth.

After Nurdin comes in this multicultural Canada, he struggles hard to find a descent job. But his efforts become futile. He remains unemployed for a long time that adds to his misery. Zera, Nurdin’s wife gets a job as a receptionist in a doctor’s clinic. So to reduce the economic pressures they put up with the family of Zera’s sister. But as the children of both of the families land up fighting most of the times, a severe quarrel between Zera’s family and Roshan’s family arose. One Friday evening, when Roshan was ironing her husband’s pants, the children of Zera and Roshan started fighting. Both the mothers ran to pacify the quarrel. In the mean time, the iron burnt a leg of the pant. Abdul became furious, and in anger, slapped his wife. Seeing her sister being slapped by Abdul, Zera could not control her rage and she lunged at Abdul with the hot iron. Nurdin came in between to block Zera’s way and Abdul was saved. A loud quarrel ensued. Threats and abuses were exchanged, and the two families separate. The Lalanis move to sixty-nine Rosecliff Park, in Don Mills, a suburb of Toronto.

Through a party where new Canadians meet the old, the Lalanis come in contact with other inhabitants of Sixty-nine Rosecliff Park. They meet Jamal, the lawyer, Esmail, the baker, and several other people from the East Indian community. Gradually, Nanji, a young professor, becomes a very good friend of Lalani children – Fatima and Hanif.

One day, when Nurdin was returning from the corner store with milk for the next day, he meets an Indian couple from Guyana, Mohan and Laxmi. Their car breaks down and so they were not able to go ahead. As Laxmi was pregnant, Nurdin feels pity for the couple and brings them home to stay overnight. Next day Romesh, Mohan’s brother, comes and takes them away. It is Romesh who finally helps Nurdin to get a job in Ontario Addiction Centre. The companionship of Romesh gives him confidence, which he had lost during the period of job-hunting in Toronto. He felt a sense of enjoyment in the company of Romesh. He starts

adopting himself in the unfamiliar environment. Romesh helps him in searching his familiar place. Thus the relationship with Romesh makes him confident and acquainted with the unfamiliar surroundings.

In the Ontario Addiction Centre, Nurdin meets Sushila, the daughter of Narendas, for whom his elder brother, Akbar had an amorous feeling in adolescence. She had played with Nurdin because he was much younger to her. Gradually, Nurdin develops a clandestine relationship with Sushila. He makes it a point of meeting everyday at her house in Kensington Market. Nurdin finds a satisfying companionship with her.

One day when Nurdin was wrapping up his work in the Ontario Addiction Centre, he sees a white woman in distress. He puts his hand forward for help. But unfortunately, he was arrested with the charge of sexually assaulting this white woman. Thus throughout the novel, Vassanji focuses the struggle of the Lalani family in multicultural Canada. Their struggle, however, takes a different and bizarre turn when Nurdin is charged with sexually assaulting a white woman. The novel ends with an optimistic note. The white woman drops the charge of rape against Nurdin. Once again the Lalanis start living a smooth life. But it remains dilemma whether such things will not happen again.

*No New Land* deals with the story of Shamsi community. Here Vassanji gives voice to a Canadian immigrant experience. He illustrates the fate of this community in Toronto where Nurdin Lalani emigrates with his family. The snow that Nurdin and his family encounter on entering Canada becomes metonymic of Otherness. The hostility of the weather anticipates that Canada is a country causing alienation and isolation for Nurdin and his family. After their arrival in Canada, Nurdin and his family have trouble finding accommodation. Eventually they move to Don Mills where various members of the community who have migrated to Canada before now live under appalling circumstances, cherishing the “illusion of home and shelter from an alien society.”<sup>6</sup> It seems that “the tension between assimilation and acculturation to mainstream Canadian culture, versus maintaining some kind of racial or cultural integrity brought over from the old land.”<sup>7</sup> Disappointments and humiliation that Nurdin experience bring about unwillingness to adapt culturally. A new land profoundly alienates him. For him Canada is not different from Africa. This place turns out to be ‘no new home’ and ‘no new land’ because the same experience of disillusionment in the home left behind in Africa gets repeated in the new home in Canada. In Africa he was in trouble and in Canada also he is in an

uneasy position. But in the hours of distress time and again he remembers his homeland, Tanzania. He is always hanging between these two lands. It seems that he in neither here nor there. Thus *No New Land* can be said to detail, “the ironies, the pathos and the hardships of having to live between two worlds, neither of which provides the harmony of a life that the mind imagines and craves for.”<sup>8</sup>

As we know that diasporic writings are invariably concerned with writers’ attachment to their homelands, it is quite evident in Vassanji’s *No New Land*. Here we get an elaborate description of East Africa in the second chapter. In this context Vassanji can be compared with Rohinton Mistry who also describes his homeland India in his novels like *Such A Long Journey* and *A Fine Balance*. But this attachment by diasporic writers is countered by a yearning for a sense of belonging to their current places of abode. Caught physically between the two worlds, the diasporic writer are “transitional being” or “liminal personae”<sup>9</sup> that is they are in the process of moving from one cultural state of existence to another. In this state of transition, some respond ambivalently to their dual cultures or societies. For others, the liminal or transitional state is too prolonged to cope with, and they may withdraw to their ancestral identity or homeland. Perhaps this is why the protagonist of *No New Land*, Nurdin Lalani, and other immigrants try to circumscribe themselves within their own land. They remain attached to their ancestral customs, traditions, languages and religions. Throughout the novel, *No New Land*, Vassanji embellishes the characters with their ancestral traits. The cultural identity that the characters of *No New Land* try to formulate is an ambivalent conflict between traditions and cultures of their places of abode and homelands. Due to this conflict the Asian African community gets segregated. Therefore, this community feels alienated from the mainstream of the Canadian society. So Vassanji has described this community in segregated apartments in the building, Sixty-nine Rosecliff Park.

The quest for identity is one of the important issues in the writings of diasporic writers. Vassanji’s *No New Land* is not an exception. In this novel Vassanji attempts to explore the quest for identity through the character of Nurdin Lalani. Lalani endeavours to establish an identity of his own. The family, the community and the society obstruct his endeavours. The displacement, racial discrimination and the generation differences put hindrances in the way to formulate an independent individual identity.

Throughout the novel, Nurdin tries to formulate an identity for himself. He is obsessed with the negative feeling that he has now lost his identity due to the displacement from Africa to Canada. He starts developing a feeling that the new identity -- an African immigrant of Asian origin -- has been imposed on him due to his displacement. Whether he likes this new identity of his or not, is of no significance. As everything around Nurdin is new and unfamiliar, the feeling of alienation envelops him poignantly. He indulges in memory. He remembers that back in Africa, he had some identity of his own. He knew a lot of persons there. A lot of persons also knew him. They had honour and respect for him. But in Canada he has no recognition. Thus he attempts to locate an atmosphere of familiarity in the vast and unfamiliar city. In this attempt he visits Sixty-nine Rosecliff Park. There he finds the members of his own community. This attempt offers him relief. He feels that he is not an alien in the new place of settlement. The sense of security develops in him. It shows his innate attachment to his community.

It is essential for each culture to have its own distinguishing identity in a multicultural state. But when a new identity is imposed on the basis of race, colour and religion, the cruel brutalities become rife with reality. The characters of *No New Land* feel that a new identity has been imposed on them due to displacement. This imposition is very dangerous for them. It challenges their original identity. The brutal fact of imposition of the new identity on them is that it arises in the context of discrimination. In *No New Land* the discrimination based on colour is projected powerfully in the following observation:

The black kicked us out, now the whites will do the same...

Where do we go from here?<sup>10</sup>

Through this observation, M.G. Vassanji attracts our attention not only to circumstances under which the people belonging to Indian origin left their Africa but also to the fact that they have lost their sense of a secure identity. Now they have to adopt and adapt to an atmosphere of an unknown, unfamiliar environment. Their identity now will be clubbed together with the people belonging to India. Something that Hazi Lalani, the father of Nurdin, had lost when he had migrated to Zanzibar, East Africa, in the first decade of the twentieth century. He had laboured hard to establish himself there. He knew that it was impossible to return to the land of his birth. So he had built a home for himself, where he could breathe an air of security. He felt that his family would no longer suffer from uprootedness. He died "believing he had found a new country for his descendents."<sup>11</sup>

But very soon Hazi's belief shattered. After his death the political scenario changed in East Africa. It became independent. With the Black coming to power, the era of the White domination came to an end. As Indian people did not belong to either of the groups -- neither whites nor blacks -- they were treated with discrimination. After the Africans obtained political independence, superior authorities often took decisions unfavourable to Indians. Their Citizenship was taken away and they were expelled out of the country. Hence when Nurdin Lalani and his family were thrown out of Tanzania, he had an option of going to Canada. But Canada does not appear as a new land. The black and horrible face of discrimination is visible in an incident that takes place in the subway tunnel in Canada. This incident clearly shows that the discrimination rules the roost here as well. At this tunnel three white youths attack Ismail, an Asians immigrant from Dar es Salaam. They joyfully abuse him. Pointing to his package of meat pies, they shout, "what do you have there, Paki? Hey, hey? Paki-Paki-Paki."<sup>12</sup> They punch him in the stomach. The bystanders cannot do anything. Nanji is one of them. The three youths force their domination over others. They have a feeling of superiority because they are born whites. They expect that people around them should acknowledge the superiority of their colour.

This incident provokes the immigrants for agitations. People assemble at Esmail's residence. Once more they are bound to think of their existence:

What now? Was this a sign of things to come danger to self and property, to wife and kids? Have we come to the right place after all? <sup>13</sup>

Nanji, a young immigrant professor, also suffers from racial discrimination. Often returning from the University by bus, Nanji sits alone on the seat. Many passengers remain standing but do not sit near him and all the way Nanji thinks about racism:

Racism, the word kept intruding his mind and kept pushing it back. On what basis racism? It could be my face, dark, brooding, scowling, and cratered. <sup>14</sup>

The novel *No New Land* opens with two incidents. Both are the results of racial discrimination. Nurdin's daughter Fatima gets admission in art and science instead of pharmacy, the prestigious one, and Nurdin is accused of raping a white girl. The later incident becomes central to the novel. Fatima, ultimately, accepts her plight and decides that art and science was not so bad after all. But Nurdin has to face many problems in and out of the family. The white lady Mrs. Broadbent refuses to serve him lunch in the cafeteria. She declares

in a hostile tone that she is not going to serve the rapist. She further adds, “Where he comes from, both his hands would be chopped off.”<sup>15</sup>

In African city Dar Nurdin had to face fierce racial discrimination. He was neglected there for he had fairer complexion. He had realised that even the peons in Dar rose above him merely because of their black skins and in the promotions too he saw himself overlooked and neglected. Even in Canada he has to suffer a lot due to racial discrimination. In spite of being sufficiently qualified, as a seller of shoes, he remains unemployed for a long time. In fact, he hunts wildly for the job but the same story is repeated everywhere if he had a Canadian experience. He is being discriminated against because of his having a different identity. He feels that the job market in Canada is made only for a certain group of people -- the whites. The story of discrimination is at climax in the following observation:

“I am afraid, Nurdin,” Mr. Rogers said, “We gave the job to someone else.”

Nurdin exploded, “But my experience! I know shoes, I can give references.”

“I am sorry, there were many applicants.”

“I know I do not have Canadian experience,” he breathed hotly and with emotion on the phone, “but how can I get Canadian experience if you do not give me chance? I have sold shoes for eight years! Eight years ...”

“Perhaps you were overqualified, sir.”

That was a new one. Overqualified. Good for laughs, and it got many. <sup>16</sup>

A feeling of demarcation and discrimination and a sense of identity have always been in the writings of writers like M.G. Vassanji. Writing from a “hyphenated”<sup>17</sup> space probably instigates him to manifest his expressions of identity.

In *No New Land*, Vassanji discusses the question of culture. Since Canada has a multicultural ethos, preserving one’s own culture becomes a vital issue. Sixty-nine Rosecliff Park, the building situated in Don Mills, in the suburbs of Toronto, represents a cultural identity as a whole. The macrocosmic outlook of this building projects an amalgamation of different people belonging to similar origins. They interact among themselves to protect their culture, tradition and customs. They create a friendly atmosphere through their interaction with one another. This friendly atmosphere in Sixty-nine Rosecliff Park, avers to the fact that maintenance of a mixed cultural milieu among all the Canadians is a necessity. Otherwise, the danger of the eventual annihilation of one’s own culture is very obvious.

The microcosmic view of the Sixty-nine Rosecliff Park, projects that though the people dwelling there are distinguished as Indians, but in reality they exist in diversity. They belong to different parts of India. Some are Goan, some are Madrasi, some Hyderabad, some Gujarati, and some are Punjabi. There are Indians not only from India but from different parts of the world as well. For example, the Lalanis belong to East Africa. Ram Deen belongs to the Caribbean Islands. Sheru Mama and her husband Ramju, and Gulshan Bai belong to India. Though there is clear portrayal of diversified cultures of India, it also prevents at the same time a single blend of various identities belonging to an umbrella identity called India. Sixty-nine Rosecliff Park reminds one of Firozsha Baag created by Rohinton Mistry. This apartment building from *Tales from Firozsha Baag* encompasses the exhibition of a unique cultural identity exactly like Sixty-nine Rosecliff Park of *No New Land*.

The existence becomes important for an immigrant in an alien land. When he is surrounded by an atmosphere of unfamiliarity, he feels that he does not have a proper space to live in. He experiences that he is being treated as an outsider. He can't avail himself of any privileges and adventures in the society because he exists as a member of the minority. This sense of minority gets deep rooted in his mind and soul, because of discriminations and inequalities which he faces every moment of his life. Gradually, therefore, he needs a space for existence. Such a need troubles Nurdin too.

Nurdin feels that several individuals have shaped his existence. He can't exist on his own. The dominance of his father in his early life gives birth to a feeling that he has no individual identity. And thus being unable to formulate his own voice, Nurdin thinks that he has no space in his family. He is being circumscribed to a particular domain and someone else is drawing the boundary. The identity that he exists with is being given to him by the family, the society, the community he lives in.

Nanji, the young professor, and Jamal, the lawyer, also try to grapple the question of their respective existences. When one is unemployed, one struggles for one's livelihood. During this struggle life becomes too hard to live. The existence is obviously questioned. The struggle for existence becomes so complicated that one lives an absurd existence:

“But suppose I use my free will to decide to go on with this absurd existence, as you call it....”

“Well, if you really choose that....to go on living....then you live with that choice facing you every moment of your life. You are truly alive. Most people go on mindlessly of course; they don't choose to live. That's because they do what they are told or made to do....And think of this: when death comes unasked, when it takes you by surprise, it will rob you of even this free choice, because when you thought you were choosing to live, it was only letting you live. The only way you can exercise free will, defeating it, is by taking your own life. <sup>18</sup>

Vassanji portrays this question of existence through the characters of Jamal and Nanji. Their sense of survival becomes a big question. In fact, the question of morality and ethics, of good faith and compromise keep on tormenting Nanji. When one is tormented by such question on life, one feels that surviving is not possible in a society where one is being categorised as a member of the minority group. His existence becomes problematic and so to get rid of this problem of life; he likes to live in a world of dreams and illusion.

Roots play a significant role in the lives of immigrants. Their behaviour, attitude, and modes of life, seem to be formulated by their roots. Nurdin has his roots in India. His father went to Africa many years ago with certain innate Indian characteristics. Nurdin inherited these characteristics and came to Canada with them. The Indian characteristics can be seen through its customs, tradition, typicalities and cuisines that Vassanji portrays in *No New Land*. It can be observed in the very beginning of the novel. When Fatima receives envelop from some University, which may decide her career, she becomes excitedly anxious. Becoming nervous may be a human trait, but whispering prayers superstitiously due to nervousness, anxiety and excitement is a typical Indian characteristic:

It did not occur to her that the decision she awaited had already been made a few days before, and she whispered a prayer in much the same her mother sometimes did...<sup>19</sup>

Nurdin's wife Zera also shows the typical Indian traits in her. When the Lalanis immigrated to Canada, Zera had got with her lots of souvenirs and memories from Africa. But when they settled down in Sixty-nine Rosecliff Park, most of the things went to the dustbin,

except the photograph of Hazi Lalani. It was the first object to go up on the walls. One may draw a conclusion that this sort of respect for father-in-law may be a traditional human trait but lighting incense sticks and holding them in front of the photograph is an Indian trait of respect and devotion for the father-in-law. Hanif, Nurdin's son, has also some innate Indian characteristics. Hanif calls Nanji "Eeyore."<sup>20</sup> Eeyore is an accented form of the Indian word for friends. This is a typical way of summoning friends in India. Friends are sometimes called as 'yaar'. Yasmin Ladha, one of the Indo Canadian authors, also uses this word 'yaar' in her collection of short stories, *Lion's Granddaughter and Other Stories*. She addresses her readers as "yaar-readerji."<sup>21</sup> Not only the Lalanis but other people of Indian roots in the Sixty-nine Rosecliff Park also have such inborn Indian Characteristics. Jamal uses the term "chacha"<sup>22</sup> to summon an aged person. 'Chacha' is an Indian word to show respect for the elderly people. It is an Indian word for uncle.

Through the various characters of *No New Land*, Vassanji beautifully portrays some Indian traditions and customs. Touching the feet of the elderly guests always concludes the welcoming ceremony in Indian tradition. When the Missionary, the religious man, comes to Nurdin's apartment, there was a traditional welcoming ceremony. As he entered the room the females of the congregation, dressed in white, attempted an elaborate welcoming ceremony, "with touching of feet and cracking of Knuckles and garlanding..."<sup>23</sup> When one visit someone's house for the first time, it is an Indian tradition to take sweets or fruits along. Nurdin does not forget his tradition. When he and Romesh visit Sushila's house at Kensington Market, they take some fruits with them.

While portraying Indian traditions, customs and typical characteristics, Vassanji talks about the Indian cuisines. As we all know, the food one takes, affirms the traits of a particular place. The food that the Indian dwelling in Sixty-nine Rosecliff Park eats shows that they belong to India. For instance, chappatis is the staple food of people of Northern part of India. Indians prefer to take it with pickles. They even tend to put ghee or clarified butter over the chappatis. Sheru Mama and her husband, Ramju, tend to serve chappatis that way:

Sheru Mama makes hundreds of chappatis everyday and baby-sits to toddlers at the same time, while husband Ramju helps with the dishes and puts the required dollop of margarine over every chappati. Her customers tend to be single men who will eat a chappati with a pickle, or butter and jam, or curry canned in the United States.<sup>24</sup>

“Samosas”<sup>25</sup> are one of the favourite snacks of the people of Northern part of India. They like to take them with tea, especially; “Tea would fetched and samosas.”<sup>26</sup> Vassanji mentions about having Samosas with tea even in one of the short stories in *Uhuru Street*. In ‘In the Quiet of a Sunday Afternoon’, Zarina sells samosas to the Indian people living in Uhuru Street. We can get a sentence like this, “I have tea and wait for the woman to bring samosas.”<sup>27</sup> Indians are well known throughout the world for a variety of fried and spicy food. Even in breakfast, they prefer to have fried food. When Mohan and Lakshmi, the Indians from Guyana stayed back for a night in Nurdin’s apartment, Zera made some “puris.”<sup>28</sup> Uma Parmeswaran, in her *Rootless But Green are the Boulevard Trees*, mentions several Indian cuisines. One of her characters says:

How about puris? I haven’t had a good Indian meal in ages. Here, I’ll get the dough ready. Arun, it is time you wash your eyes. Slice some onions for raita’.

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The literary members of Indian diaspora use the names of Indian cuisines deliberately. Through this act they want to affirm their existence and identity. In fact, the cultural identity that comes up through food is very powerful because it exhibits the everyday modes of life. This is the reason why Vassanji mentions the names of food in all his works. It is not only descriptions of about food, but also enumerating the traditions, customs and typical Indian characteristics that prove the fact that maintenance of culture is an innate trait of immigrants. Nurdin and his family of Sixty-nine Rosecliff Park try to maintain their culture.

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