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# The Door of no Return: Mythical Journeys and Conflicting Identities in M.G. Vassanji's *The Book of Secrets*

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### Abstract

Human journeys are as old as our civilisation and we have evolved with our journeys. To many, there are no journeys at all; it is just an illusion, and there are only arrivals and departures. This paper will attempt to explore the diasporic journeys of the major characters in M.G. Vassanji's *The Book of Secrets* from pre-colonial Gujarat to East Africa during the maritime or oceanic trade that flourished during the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The novels focus on the socio-cultural transactions of these characters in an in-between position in British East Africa, where they flourished their occupations and trades and felicitated the colonial rich in the interiors of Africa. In this paper, I will argue that these journeys are mythical in the sense that they pioneered civilisations and establishments that are remembered and glorified by subsequent generations, almost reaching mythic proportions. These migrants are often seen juggling their contradictory identitarian affiliations, which often pose a challenge in their transactions with native culture. Every so often, this inability emerges out of their self-proclaimed comparative superiority over the natives, posing a challenge to their very survival in a foreign land and propelling their further migrations in search of a better home in yet another cultural space.

**Keywords:** postcolonialism, oceanic trade, identity, journey, origin, Vassanji

Vassanji's account of his first visit to India in *A Place Within: Rediscovering India* begins with a suitable quote from *The Odyssey*: "What am I in for now? Whose country have I come this time?" (Homer, *The Odyssey* XXIII) Similarly, in the *Book of Secrets*, for

Nurmohammed Pipa, “leaving home had been easy, not so the return” (BS 134). In major diasporic novels, all the journeys are one-way affairs with little possibility of return to the “home country.” This can be interpreted as a certain fixation or attachment with one’s country of birth, and arriving in a new land is always full of puzzlement and bewilderment. Moyez Gulamhussein Vassanji, who writes by the abbreviated authorial name M.G. Vassanji, was born in Kenya to parents of Indian origin and belongs to the esoteric Khoja Ismail Community. In 1959, his family migrated to Tanzania [then Tanganyika], and later he joined the University College at Nairobi [now the University of Nairobi]. Then he left for the United States in 1969 to complete his bachelor’s degree at MIT, followed by a PhD in nuclear physics from the University of Pennsylvania. Finally, in 1978, Vassanji went to Canada and taught at the University of Toronto before becoming a full-time writer. He now lives in Toronto after adopting Canadian citizenship. Now, from Canada, he has written eight novels, two collections of short stories, and one biography. With such an over-hyphenated identity, the question now arises: how should one read Vassanji, from Indian, East African, or Canadian perspectives? Most of Vassanji’s novels are set in East Africa, concentrating on the plight of East African Indians during the colonial and post-colonial periods. They opt for a second migration (like Vassanji himself) to Europe, the US, or Canada. Vassanji is seriously engaged in understanding the effects of migration on their lives. He also tries to explore the intricate relationship between the European colonial forces (German and British), Indians, and indigenous Africans. He seems to be more concerned with history and memory. However, in his novels, we never find a simple, linear narrative, unfolding chapters after chapters of the past; rather, he is fond of exploring the historical past through stories, personal myths, and folklore, thus making it mysterious. Though memory plays an important role in invoking the past, it mostly reveals “half-truths” or is ambiguous by nature. As Vassanji once said in one of his interviews, “ambiguity is the driving force or the nuclear reaction behind my creativity.” (Desai, 2012). Hence, in Vassanji’s novels, the historical past concerning the origins of its protagonists is always mediated through memories of childhood experiences, myths, folklore, grandma’s tales, and street stories. Hence, it is more

concealed than revealed and shrouded in mystery. Being mediated through memory, the “truth” that emerges lacks validity and will always remain obscure, hidden in the detritus of the past. It can be faded and then retrieved in a new avatar to be narrated in a different way. So, a new story can emerge with a new reconstruction of the past. Even as it emerges in various versions, the past will always haunt the storyteller.

There were also movements and trade activities in East Africa before the arrival of British and Germans in the late 1880s. There were thousands of Swahili, Omani, and South Asian (mostly from India) merchants doing brisk business on the coasts of East Africa. The Asian community of merchants, traders, and financiers engaged in maritime trade also mobilised human resources from their “homelands” as slaves, petty officials, accountants, and assistants. Many traders from the western coast of India and the hinterland were no exception. From the East African coasts they proceeded to Inlands of Africa to spread their trade and habitation. Throughout the nineteenth century, Asian involvement in African trade contributed to the economy of the continent on its eastern coast. Innumerable caravan routes opened up during this time, passing through the Congo and up to Lake Victoria. In those days, the island of Zanzibar was the epicentre of all trading activities, dominated by the Omani clove planters. Compared to the trading activities on the coast inland trading. (Hutcheon, 198) in the changed socio-cultural matrix of the East African society during the colonial rule, the problem of identity across the Asian diaspora remained quite problematic. The Asians, with their brown complexions, settled for an in-between position, subservient to the British. Unquestionably, the blacks were doubly colonised in colonial East Africa. First as the direct subjects of the British or Germans, and second by the Asian migrants, who were popularly addressed as “baniya” by the natives. Interestingly, most Asian households had an African as house-help with very insignificant wage. These Asian migrants were undoubtedly the preferred partners of the British as they assisted in the expansion of the frontiers of colonialism through their close-knit networks in the “dukkawallah” community. (Siundu 2005).

Interestingly, noted critic and theorist Vijay Mishra once commented: “All diasporas are unhappy, but every diaspora is

unhappy in its own way” (Mishra, 2007). Any issue of identity in any diaspora is closely contested and negotiated with several compulsions of racial, cultural, and linguistic divide. In this liminal space between identity construction and performative shifting of affiliations and transnational locations This leads to a diasporic nostalgia ideated from an “imaginary homeland,” which arises out of culture shock, xenophobia, or fear of miscegenation and racial suspicion. Isolated in their self-created social and cultural ghettos, these diasporic individuals, in their squeamishness about racial culture and contempt for the black colour invite their own doom. This social tension, which is evident in the first generation, is wonderfully portrayed in Vassanji’s novels without impartial intent.

Fear of assimilation and losing a dear one to “the other’s” culture has always been a possibility. In this process, one might lose one’s identity and socio-cultural past. Interestingly, the formation of identity and place of origin have been two of the major preoccupations of the characters in Vassanji’s novels. In *The Book of Secrets*, Pius makes forays into memory lane, narrating his story and making a self-journey into his individual past, but ends up nowhere. The journeys in Vassanji’s novels are mostly allusive and ambiguous, where the characters land at a pit stop before carrying their journey further. The obsession for home, origin, and identity seems to have no end, and the journey is taken like a blindfolded camel driving an oil mill: “walking perpetually in circles, patient, doggedly persistent in the illusion that it had a destination” (TBS 132). Vassanji does not seem to offer any solace for the unending journeys of these characters, probably typifying it as a modern predicament. In *The Book of Secrets*, Pius, in his inability to return to his homeland of Goa, adopts Dar as his home. His efforts to rewrite the community’s history would not be fulfilled, as one’s perception of the past from the temporal distance of the present would only reveal half-truths, half-stories, and half-lives. In doing so, Vassanji is found to assign a kind of karmic sense to these one-way journeys made by the characters in search of their identity and origins. He tries to relate that to the first generation, who left their home countries for better opportunities and never returned. This is one of the most recurring themes in Vassanji’s novels. The saga of migration is transferred from generation to generation in almost an unending way. The characters often blame

their fate or Karma for these eternal quests. They are often seen to find a link with their ancestors, who chose to live in Africa after migrating from India as British indented labourers for the construction of the Uganda-Kenya railway link in the 1880s.

Further, like most of Vassanji's novels in *The Book of Secrets*, the arrivals lead to a problematic stay since, in a new land, instant assimilation with the native culture is not always possible. The migrant individuals will have to struggle for their survival, fighting small but vexing battles of life. Similarly, in *The Book of Secrets*, the narrative spans over a period of 75 years and three generations. The narrator, Pius Fernandes, a former history teacher, unfolds the story of the Indian-Shmasi immigrant community, which is embedded in the colonial history of Tanzania, using a 1913 diary of Alfred Corbin, the then Assistant District Commissioner (ADC). Pius's quest for the truth about the origins of Ali Akber Ali has ramifications such as the exploration of the history of an entire community in colonial Tanzania during the conflict between the English and the German, the problematic nature of desire, particularly of Corbin for Mariamu, the problematic of Mariamu's silence, the murky parentage of Ali etc. This book of Vassanji dramatizes arrivals fraught with uncertainties. Upon his arrival in Africa, Corbin seems to be overcome by the dark, strange, wild, and menacing presence that Africa has irrevocably taken on in his colonial imagination. It is an enigma, fraught with desire and fear, which is extended to his relation to Mariamu, the puzzling consequences of which impact the fate of Pipa and Ali Akber Ali. His act of maintaining a journal might well seem an epistemic control he exercises over the life among the natives, but his liaison with Mariamu and the complicated chain of events in relation to the stealing of the diary, its coming into the possession of Pipa, and finally to Pius is a spinoff over which he has no control. Now the diary seems to have gone on a peregrination with enigmatic fallout, as it were. Later in the novel, Rita and Ali, both lovers, arrive in London in search of a haven that could protect them from the wrath of the community back home in Dar. Like many others, they run to the land that offers them freedom and opportunities to fulfil their desires. But the pursuit of freedom involves the transposition of old selves and the relocation of those selves in the new land, not without the anxiety of being insecure and obscure. Gregory, Pius's English

teacher and possibly gay partner, is an example of an individual who leaves home and the old world together with their ties. For his part, Pius exults in his freedom from an old country and discards family ties, social conventions, and traditions. In the words of Alison Toron: “It is significant that Gregory renounces his British passport to live in the newly independent Tanzania, suggesting that queer sexuality has no place in dominant Western discourses and that Vassanji at least allows for the possibilities of alternative sexualities by introducing Gregory as a character.” (13). But the relationship has its own share of uncertainties, and given the ambiguous sexual orientation of Pius (bisexual), their relationship becomes far from certain. The metafictional representation of this matter of history by Pius is a kind of his arrival there at the heart of the truth, but the metafictionality is itself enigmatic. As Ashok Mohapatra would say following these blots, “it would be a dark, endless, one-way passage of the diasporic self” from which there is no return, nor can he progress towards any closure or resolution (Mohapatra, 2007). This further reminds us that in the *Book of Secrets*, Pipa describes his life’s journey as “the blindfolded camel that drove the mill as it walked perpetually in circles—patient, doggedly persistent in the illusion that it had a destination.” (BS 132). Thus, the journey of every diasporic individual in search of his origin, identity, and “home” is always an endless one, just like the Shehzadee in Arabian Knights churning out stories after stories without beginning or end; in the circular path, you end up where you started.

In *The Book of Secrets*, which has a historical narrative structure, Pius tries to trace the relevance of a stolen colonial diary to a specific community’s past. In his attempts to rewrite history, he ends up writing his own biography. He being also an outsider to the community, his perception of the historical past is questionable. Surpassing his “outsider” status as a Goan-Indian, he attempts at a sympathetic projection of the plight of the Shamsi community under colonial British and German rule. His inability to unravel the mysteries buried in the past confirms Vassanji’s stance that there are limitations to our knowledge of the past as it is riddled with ambiguity, contradictions, and the narrowness of his subjective perception. Curiously, the book ends with an epilogue. In the very beginning of the novel before handing over the diary to him: “What

is history, sir" (BS 4). In that very instance, Pius remained silent, and the question remains unanswered in the novel, just like the various other mysteries that remained unravelled. It seems that Vassanji never wanted to give a conventional answer to the question. Rather, he offers us a community history that is autobiographical, and also allegorical of the national history. In defence of his refusal to clear the mysteries, Vassanji once said: "Writing of history is always an intrusion into the past but the person who is intruding is never very far from the characters he recreates" (Shawn 110). In the same interview, he further elucidates: "History is play between the created and the creating, the real and the imagined" where "the narrator and the historian both play a kind of game with history" (Shawn 108). This is very crucial for the thematic understanding of the novel, as with our limited access to the past from the temporal distance of the present, the credibility and authenticity of the past are always dubious. Hence, Vassanji believes, the answers to these questions are not very important, but what is important is "trying to understand the past" by "reconstructing it" (Shawn 117).

Vassanji's novels wonderfully exhibit the diasporic, and postcolonial space and assume hybridized and also hyphenated identities of these migrants. The characters variously deal with the problems of their origins in the lands from where they or their forefathers migrated under compelling circumstances; the origins continue to be mysterious, and therefore these call for ambivalent affiliation with communities and culture in specific chronotopes; many characters carry memories as cultural baggage to interpret the present and construct new identities in places that are culturally alien and hostile to them; they assume or evade or even become victims of domestic and political responsibilities; they continue to search for home as a cultural baggage to interpret the present and construct new identities in places that are culturally alien and hostile to them; they assume or evade or even become victim of domestic and political responsibilities; many of them continue to search for home as a signifier of stasis, meaningful selfhood and fulfillment, while home gets perpetually deferred to an indefinite future much beyond the scope of the narrative; many, however, manage to make a return either for a brief period or for good, although owing to peculiar personal reasons that can never be generalised. The novel in

discussion shows us how important it is for someone to affiliate himself or herself socially, culturally, and politically to a place for survival and call it home, even as such affiliations become impossible because of his or her dubious origins. Pius is homeless. So is Pipa once again with unknown genealogical antecedents. The uncertainty about origin and inability for cultural and political affiliations necessitate one's search for viable identities and homes across geographical and cultural borders. People move on in search of them, although with little success. They build narratives of their personal lives and embed them in the history of the community, which is informed by a still larger history of colonialism in east Africa. *Book of Secrets* turns out to be a metafiction of Pius' fictional exercise in fabricating a narrative of the self as embedded in the history of a community that seeks a collective identity in East Africa, where the British and the Germans were engaged in a power struggle. In a beleaguered colonial space, the characters and communities have fluid identities and volatile affiliations. In such cases, fictions of the origins and growth of communities as well as the lives and times of individuals are fabricated with the help of scrappy and hazy memories and fragmented histories. The fragmentary diary of Corbin is the source for the stories of characters like Mariamu, Akku, and Maynard. While retrieving them and structuring them, Pius tries to build his self-narrative. But these stories remain incomplete and disjointed; this disjointedness, which is a structural principle of the novel, problematises the origins and identities of the characters and invests in the diary a mystery that ironically becomes the supreme truth. How profoundly meaningful is the diary, which is otherwise fragmentary and incomplete? The title of the novel that alludes to the mystery and power of a truth that cannot be textualised, and a story that is fragmentary and incomplete and the ultimate analysis is more powerful than a story that is well crafted and complete.

Hence, homelessness led to migrations and the state of exile both in the homes left behind in the African countries and in the new homes in the countries of the West. A sense of emotional rupture, alienation, and psychic displacement were the natural consequences of such migrations. And yet the migrants, who carried the baggage of their Indian culture and memories of home from both India and

Africa, relocated themselves in the new world with reconfigured identities. For with every new journey, home becomes “multilocal,” and the diasporic self, in its unending wanderlust, goes on seeking new “home” affiliations after each subsequent migration. Assimilations with foreign cultures happen, though at the cost of an in-betweenness that must be overcome as a new land with its imposing socio-cultural imperatives would be hard to repudiate. The only home that seems viable is the “imaginary” one with its mythical dimensions (Rushdie).

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