

# An Exploration of the Concepts of Place and Space with Emphasis on Past and Memory in Selected Novels of M. G. Vassanji

**Krupa Sophia Jeyachandran & Urvashi Kaushal**

Applied Mathematics and Humanities Department, SVNIT

Surat-395007, Gujarat, India.

E-mail: krupasvnit@gmail.com; urvashikaushal6@gmail.com

**Abstract** This paper attempts to analyse the concepts of place and space with reference to diaspora, migration and settlement. The paper elucidates the characters' places of origin i.e. their birthplace, places where they spent their childhood and on the other their ancestors' homeland i.e. their ancestral place. The past of the characters situated in diaspora plays a pivotal role. The correlation between one's place of origin and ancestral place produces the "place of memory" which weighs heavily on the present-day lives of the characters. Having been immigrants in another land, the places of memory grant the characters identity and roots. Hence, their memories are often so powerful that they by and large return to the specific places. They create their own space in which they attempt to make the most of their lives. Edward Relph's concept of "existential outsidership" and Henri Lefebvre's theories on social space have been exploited in this article to enhance the authors' objectives.

**Key words** place; space; past; present; memory; identity; diaspora

**Authors** **Krupa Sophia Jeyachandran** is a research scholar at the Applied Mathematics and Humanities Department, Surat, Gujarat, India. Her main research area includes Afro-American women's writings, postcolonial and diaspora studies.

**Dr. Urvashi Kaushal** is Assistant Professor, Applied Mathematics and Humanities Department, Surat, Gujarat, India. Her main research area includes diaspora fiction, Postcolonial fiction and employability skills.

## Introduction

Moyez Gulamhussein Vassanji is an Afro-Asian author who was born in Nairobi, Kenya in 1950 and brought up in Tanzania. He shifted to the U.S after having

obtained a scholarship and presently he is residing in Canada. Vassanji is primarily placed in the diasporic realm as he has vaulted three continents. Hence, issues related to homeland, past, memory and identity predominantly gain centre-stage in his novels. The characters ascribe special attachment to their respective homelands. Vijay Mishra writes, “Recalling homelands from a diasporic space is not uncommon among writers of the diaspora” (179). This can certainly be attributed to M. G. Vassanji. In his works the significance of the ancestral place in the lives of the characters can be seen. As the characters are always on the move, it is but natural that the memories of their homeland cling to them dearly. This paper predominantly focuses on two main ideas:

1. The past or the homeland of the characters which is the place of memory.
2. The picture of homeland as remembered by the ancestors of the characters which eventually gives identity to the characters.

The works chosen for our exposition are *The Gunny Sack* (1989), *No New Land* (1991), *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall* (2003), *The Assassin’s Song* (2007) and *The Magic of Saida* (2012). The ideas of homeland and place of birth figure prominently in the novels of the diaspora. For a writer like M. G. Vassanji straddling the three byzantine continents of Asia, Africa and North America, place becomes a strategic issue which he has precisely worked upon. In the contemporary scenario, globalization, transnationalism and muticulturalism have become decisive issues. Citizens today are inclined to shed their parochial and nationalist tendencies in order to embrace a global and a universal outlook. The question then arises as to why the topic of ancestral place or the homeland is given undue attention. The answer, of course, is a veritable part of the question itself as the very word ‘ancestral’ has links with history and place. The place of origin provides identity, roots as well as a sense of belonging to an individual.

### **Notions of Space and Place as Expounded in Humanistic Geography**

The notion of identity is deeply connected to one’s homeland. An individual is assigned with an identity as he is associated to a particular place. The homeland, thus, plays a fundamental role in the formation of identity. The individual’s past is essential in determining his present. The characters in Vassanji’s novels operate largely on past and memory. Their ideas of their homeland form a substantial part of the novels. Since they leave their motherland and move elsewhere, they are always anxious of their future in a different country. In Vassanji’s novels, the place of origin of all the characters is an important topic for our study and research. The major characters for our study are: Salim Juma — *The Gunny Sack*, Vikram Lall —

*The In-Between World of Vikram Lall*, Kamal Punja — *The Magic of Saida*, Nurdin Lalani — *No New Land* and Karsan Dargawalla — *The Assassin's Song*.

Apart from these, the minor characters are also discussed in the context of homeland and identity. It is noteworthy that all the characters have more than one place of memory. India is the ancestral place of all the characters which they remember unswervingly. Through double or triple migration, they have made “homes” in many places. A succinct insight from the subject of humanistic geography would be complementary to the central idea of the paper. While talking of space it is understood as the space of geography, i.e. a realm without any meaning; whereas naming a space becomes a place. Space denotes movement; whereas place is the ‘pause’ in between (Tuan 6). Edward Relph mentions:

Space is amorphous and intangible. It is not an entity that can be directly described or analysed. Yet, however we feel or explain space, there is nearly always some associated sense or concept of place. In general, it seems that space provides the context for places but derives its meaning from particular places. (8)

Space provides the context for places and by doing so it derives meaning and an essence. Place demonstrates a sense of belonging. When human beings invest meaning to a space by becoming attached to it, it becomes place. Human beings inhabit and cohabit in a particular space and make it unique and special by accrediting emotions to it. Thus, space is turned into a meaningful location. Space is associated with phenomenology and existentialism. It is an open arena of action and movement. Place is stopping, resting and eventually becoming involved. Edward Relph signifies that place is the very everyday and mundane fact of our knowing where to enact our lives (Relph 9). In this way we protect our place. Place thus, determines one’s existence, attachment and rootedness. Relph comments:

The basic meaning of place, its essence, does not therefore come from locations, nor from the trivial functions that places serve, nor from the community that occupies it, nor from the superficial or mundane experience... The essence of place lies in the largely unselfconscious intentionality that defines places as profound centers of human existence. (43)

### **Identity and Homeland**

In the context of Vassanji’s novels, the characters have “made, maintained and

contested,” (Cresswell 5) their places in the countries they emigrated to. The treatment of the host country towards these characters can either be favourable or hostile. Thus, they do have a ‘place of memory’ which exists in the past but emphatically and shows up in the characters’ present lives. Kamal Punja, in *The Magic of Saida* can be taken as a wonderful example to explain this predicament. In one of his interviews with Asma Sayed, Vassanji was asked about his original idea in penning *The Magic of Saida*, he replied, “Concerning Saida, if I had to name original thoughts, I’d guess one was the idea of return. What does it mean to return—to repay debts or obligations—moral ones, of course?” (Sayed 242-243)

Having come from noble and humble origins in Kilwa, a small but significant island on the southern coast of Tanzania, he settled in Edmonton, Canada as a flourishing doctor. His father Dr. Amin Punja was a Shamsi Indian who belonged to Singpur, a tiny village near Verawal on the coast of Gujarat. His mother Hamida was an African. Punja Devraj, Kamal’s great-grandfather came as a trader to Zanzibar. He blended so perfectly with the people of the African coast that “he gave himself a place name, in Indian fashion, so that he was now Punja Devraj Sawahil” (139) and “would do all he could to help resist the invasion of his adopted land” (139). The German colonization of Tanzania was at its zenith then. The novel provides considerable historical insights related to the imperialist policies of the German rule and the Maji-Maji uprising. Punja Devraj sacrificed his life for the protection of his adopted land.

Kamal was labelled as a “half-caste” by both the Africans and the Asians owing to his parentage from two different races. He returns to the place which he “had left half a lifetime ago, more; he had made a life elsewhere, planted roots there; and still Kilwa haunted” (13). He returns to Kilwa after thirty-five years to search for his beloved Saida. This search is overlaid with an exploration of past, memories of his homeland and a whole lot of historical details. In a spirited discussion with Dr. Engineer, one of his acquaintances in Kilwa, Kamal asserts his sense of belonging,

“I belong here, speak the language, but move around unconnected like a ghost.”

“I understand you are from Kilwa originally,” Navroz said. “This is home?”

“I was born here,” Kamal replied. “This is my village, I guess—my mother’s place.”

“But you don’t belong anymore...”

“Is that a question?”

“Yes.”

“Well. I am of here and these are my people, and yet I have a life and a family elsewhere. In Canada, I’ve thought of myself as African – though not African Canadian or African American - attractive illusions for a while. It becomes difficult to say *precisely* what one is anymore. Isn’t that a common condition nowadays?” (*The Magic* 222)

In a similar vein Vikram Lall pledges his loyalty to Kenya. As a Hindu—Punjabi (Indian) in particular and an Asian at large, he belongs to the third generation of Indians in Kenya. In a discussion with Njoroge he openly declares that Nakuru was his home and that he never wanted to go to India:

And would the Asians go home to India? I didn’t want to go to India [...] I knew of no world outside my Nakuru, this home, this backyard, the shopping centre, the school; this town beside the lake of flamingos, under the mysterious Menengai crater where we sometimes went on family picnics, passing the European area on the other side of the tracks. (*The In Between* 49)

It is an incredible idea for Vassanji to give a Hindu-Punjabi identity to his protagonist Vikram Lall. His grandfather like many others came to Kenya as an indentured labourer to work on the railways. Since then, the family made Kenya their home. Vikram is extremely attached to Nakuru. He only heard about India from his parents. For him, Nakuru is his home and he is very much close to it. He says quite unambiguously:

We have been Africans for three generations, not counting my own children. Family legend has it that one of the rails on the railway line just outside the Nakuru station has engraved upon it my paternal grandfather’s name, Anand Lal Peshawari, in Punjabi script- and many another rail of the line has inscribed upon it the name and birthplace of an Indian labourer. (*The In-Between* 15)

Anand Lal, my dada, stayed on in the new colony after his indentureship, picked Nakuru as the spot where he would live. (*The In-Between* 16)

Vikram always wondered, “What makes a man leave the land of his birth, the home of those childhood memories that will haunt him till his death-bed?” (17). As his grandfather had made his home in Nakuru, the family stayed there for the successive

generations. The contribution of the indentured labourers from India in Africa has been immense. Vikram Lall, in fact, pays a glowing tribute to those labourers in the following passages:

The railway line running from Mombasa to Kampala, proud “Permanent Way” of the British and “Gateway to the African Jewel,” was our claim to the land. Mile upon mile, rail next to thirty-foot rail, fishplate to follow fishplate, it had been laid by my grandfather and his fellow Punjabi labourers – Juma Molabux, Ungan Singh, Muzzafar Khan, Shyam Sunder Lal, Roshan, Tony – the cast of characters in his tales was endless and of biblical variety – recruited from an assortment of towns in northwest India and brought to an alien, beautiful, and wild country at the dawn of the twentieth century. (15)

In *The Gunny Sack* too there is a reference to the railway line construction by Indians. Dhanji Govindji narrates to Ji Bai his adventures to the innermost parts of the African continent as a part of his search for his half-caste son Huseni.

The railway goes all the way to the lake in the interior, and everywhere the train stops there is an Indian settlement. The line was built by our Indians, every stationmaster in an Indian and every conductor is also one of us. Our people are doing well under the British, Bai. (35)

Even though the Indians have made Kenya their home, the Africans do not accept them wholeheartedly. When Mwangi, Njoroge’s grandfather and the family’s gardener asked Vikram’s mother as to why the Indians have been delaying going back to their homes in India since they have made enormous fortune in Africa, she retorted, “But they don’t want to go, it’s been a long time, Mother told him. This is their land too now, where their children and grandchildren were born. Isn’t that true?” (106). In the same way, Paul Nderi, the Transport Minister and also Vikram’s boss speaks about the Indians in derision, “you people have your feet planted in both countries, and when one place gets too hot for you, you flee to the other” (314). In reply, to the minister’s scorn for the Asians, Vikram countered tartly, “It’s rather that “we people” as you call us, don’t have a place anywhere, not even where we call home” (314). This riposte by Vikram pertinently echoes the dilemma of the Asians in Africa. There is no such thing as permanent home for the Asians who are considered as in-between by the Africans.

Vikram’s mother had visited her homeland India twice since her father’s death.

Now she believed that “India was calling her, that she was ready to end her African sojourn and return finally home” (315). For her, getting back to her homeland would provide ultimate solace and peace. Allon Gal, Athena S. Leoussi, Anthony D. Smith write about this condition in the introduction of their book *The Call of the Homeland: Diaspora Nationalisms, Past and Present*:

The similarities and differences between the host country and the diaspora’s homeland are also relevant and important: frequently, the greater the contrast between the modernity of the host country and relative backwardness and conservatism of the country of origin, the weaker the attachment. By the same token, when the homeland is relatively developed and dynamic, and somehow attuned to the emigrants’ destination, the diaspora tends to consistently sustain the homeland and cherish its call. (Gal et al. xv)

Vikram Lall’s mother is shown as a typical Hindu-Punjabi Indian woman who decorated her room with idols of Indian gods and goddesses. She vehemently opposed Deepa’s decision to marry Njoroge enunciating that inter-racial marriage is not an Indian custom. Even in Africa, Vikram’s mother tries to keep their traditional customs alive. Gijssberg Oonk remarks about the people of South Asian origin in diaspora:

They may want their children to prosper in their adopted countries, but at the same time they may prefer them to adopt Indian family values, marry other Indians, and share their common culture. In other words, many South Asians living overseas tend to reproduce their Indian culture, values, language and religion as much as possible. (Oonk, 9)

Ironically, in the end of the novel we see that Vikram’s father (after his wife’s death) lives in with his African mistress. The novel depicts Vikram’s childhood in detail. He remembers the family gatherings every Sunday, when topics of mythology, politics, sports, trade and commerce would be discussed with genuine interest. In the present when he is in Canada, he fondly recalls “Nakuru, the place of my childhood” (303) and it was there during his childhood that he spent those happy moments which now are a part of memory, “. . . and we were all alive and the world was wonderful” (45). There are glaring references to the ancestral places of Vikram Lall’s parents. The feeling of exile experienced by his mother and his maternal uncle also get specified in the novel. Vikram’s mother experiences a sense of exile as her

homeland is lost to Pakistan.

When Rama's exile was the subject of the stories, it was never far from our consciousness that Mother and her brother shared a deep sense of exile from their birthplace, Peshawar, a city they would never be able to see again because it had been lost to Pakistan. And since Peshawar was the ancestral home also of my dada Anand Lal, the rest of our family could somehow share in that exile, though not with the same intensity. (*The In-Between* 85)

Vic, (as he is called in the novel) takes pride in his "Nairobi Punjabi Hindu" (221). Years later, the family moved to Nairobi for the betterment of education and business. India, however, "was always fantasyland" (19) to him. Members of the first generation of migrants have a greater affinity towards their homeland. Gijssberg Oonk explains how migrants' sense of belonging in a multicultural location has various connotations.

The diaspora as a *type of consciousness* emphasizes the variety of experiences, a state of mind and a sense of identity. This is described as *dual or paradoxical nature*. This nature has various connotations. First, it refers to the experience of discrimination and exclusion, and at the same time, the positive identification with the highly praised historical heritage of the Indian civilisation. Second, the awareness of multi-locality, the notion of belonging 'here' and 'there' as well as sharing the same 'roots' and 'routes'. The awareness of the ability to make a connection here and there, making the bridge between the local and the global. Third, double consciousness creates a 'triple consciousness', that is, the awareness of the double consciousness and being able to use it instrumentally. In addition to the identification with the host society, and the homeland, there is the identification with the locality, especially in the discourse of multiculturalism. (18)

Vikram Lal belonged to Kenya and had an identity there. In a meeting with Lieutenant Soames, he proudly asserted his Kenyan citizenship, "I said I was a Kenya citizen and currently studying in Dar es Salaam" (235). In a letter to Mzee Kenyatta requesting a personal favour, seeking permission for Mahesh Uncle to enter Kenya as a permanent resident, Vikram mentions about his ancestor's service to the nation, "Your Excellency may not be aware, I wrote, that my family's service to the nation did not begin with me. I informed him that my grandfather had worked

on the construction of the railways” (307).

As a matter of fact, Part 4 of *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall* is circumspectly titled ‘Homecoming’. As soon as Vic lands in Nairobi, he sensed that, “There is something immeasurably familiar in the cool Nairobi night that tells you you are home, that for better or worse, this is where you belong” (382). Once when his father divulged if they could also have joined the emigration rush to England after independence, Vikram replied, “We stayed because this is our country. And Mother would have gone to India, not England—you know that” (384). Here again, Vikram upheld his Kenyan national identity apart from being a Hindu-Punjabi with roots in India.

In *The Magic of Saida*, Kamal’s visit to Kilwa is marked by depression and dejection. He made desperate attempts to search for Saida and came to the very place which was once the home where he stayed with his mother.

The street was an extension of the street of the Indian shops. Arriving there, Kamal took a cross street and found the one on which he had lived with his mother. He choked when he saw the old mango tree, staid, dignified – as he imagined it- the lonely sentry of his nights’ imaginings. It looked strangely forlorn; why wouldn’t it, with its old friend gone. He went and stood under it; almost shyly put a hand on the trunk. Bwana Mwembe, do you remember me? Can you tell me things? The house in which he had lived had been built over. (The Magic 63)

Kamal’s uncle Jaffu took pride in his Tanzanian identity and his place of birth: “I was born here. I will die here.” (267). Shamim, Kamal’s wife asserted her Indianness more in Canada rather than her Africanness.

No point harping about Africa, the children are Canadians, she said, and so are you, don’t forget that. But Canadians came from somewhere? And your khano and shalwar-kameez? And your Bollywood and Shahrukh Khan? Glamorous India. What did he offer as a heritage: a dusty town in Africa, a slave ancestor, an absconded Indian grandfather. (The Magic 273)

Whether it is Kilwa for Kamal Punja, Nakuru for Vikram Lall, Pirbaag for Karsan Dargawalla, Dar es Salaam for Nurdin Lalani and Salim Juma, one can indisputably articulate that place performs a deep-seated function in influencing an individual’s worldview. All these characters have a lasting affinity with these places and they

cannot wipe them off from their memory. Their emotions, ethics and social codes are thoroughly entrenched in these places. The host countries are like “parking lots” for them where they are stationed at present and these are the locations from where they construct the memories and remember their past. Ontario and Edmonton in Canada for Vikram Lall and Kamal Punja respectively; Lisbon and Canada for Salim Juma, Boston-Harvard in the U.S and British Columbia in Canada for Karsan Dargawalla, and again the suburb Don Mills in Toronto, Canada are the settings where these characters are in the present. It is from these locations that their past is looked upon retrospectively. Kamal Punja, in fact, becomes the mouthpiece that Vassanji employs to emphasize the importance of reconfiguring the past.

That so much of history lies scattered in fragments in the most diverse places and forms—fading memories, brief asides or incidentals in books and in archives—is lamentable, but at least they exist. All we need to do is call up the fragments, reconfigure the past. (*The Magic* 131)

The themes in these novels are embodied in the framework of historical (both national and global) and socio-political events. The ingenious incorporation of incidents like the coronation of Queen Elizabeth, British imperialism, Mau-Mau war and the post-independent political assassinations in Kenya, the Maji-Maji rebellion, German colonization in Tanzania, assassination of John F. Kennedy, the forced exodus of Asians from Uganda under Idi Amin’s regime, the bitter-sweet Sino-Indian relations, the momentous Indo-Pak war, the Emergency declared by Indira Gandhi in India, the ghastly communal riots in the Gujarat state of India feature punctiliously in *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall*, *The Gunny Sack*, *The Magic of Saida* and *The Assassin’s Song* respectively. It is also remarkable Vikram Lall, Salim Juma, Kamal Punja and Karsan Dargawalla had been witnesses to their own country’s independence from the colonial establishments. However, the attainment of independence in the four East African states namely Kenya, Tanganyika, Uganda and Zanzibar in the early 1960s provided a catalyst for massive Indian migration out of the region.

In *The Gunny Sack*, the entire novel is built upon memory and the past. In fact, the gunny sack itself stands as a metaphor for memory. As the novel begins, Salim Juma, in exile from Tanzania, opens up a gunny sack bequeathed to him by a beloved great-aunt named Ji-Bai. Inside it he unearths the past—his own family’s history and the story of the Asian experience in East Africa. Its remnants and artefacts bring with them the lives of Salim’s Indian great-grandfather, Dhanji

Govindji and his extensive family. Each object in the sack is a symbol of the past. As he gropes into the sack, he narrates their community's history in Africa. Memory has been exclusively presented in the novel.

Memory, Ji-Bai would say, is this old sack here, this poor dear that nobody has any use for any more. Stroking the sagging brown shape with affection, she would drag it closer, to sit at her feet like a favourite child. It would plunge her hand through the gaping hole of a mouth, and she would rummage inside. (*The Gunny* 3)

Dhanji Govindji arrived in Matamu—from Zanzibar, Porbander, and ultimately Junapur—and had a son with an African slave named Bibi Taratibu. Back in Gujarat, India, Zanzibar was the “Jewel of Africa, isle of enchantment” (9). He started his trade in Matamu “where Africa opened its womb to India” (45), and with the help of mukhi Ragavji Devraj from his community he managed to establish his first home in Africa. Later, growing in affluence, he married Fatima, who bore his other children. Part II of the novel is named for Kulsum, who marries Juma, Husein's son; she is the mother of the narrator, Salim. We learn of Juma's childhood as a second-class member of his stepmother's family after his mother, Moti, dies.

Among the stories tumbling from the gunny sack comes the tailor Edward bin Hadith's story of the naming of Dar es Salaam, the city Kulsum moves to with her children after her husband's death. Gradually Salim takes over the telling, recalling his own childhood. His life guides the narrative from here on. He remembers his mother's store and neighbours' intrigues, the beauty of his pristine English teacher Mrs. Gaunt at primary school, cricket matches, and attempts to commune with the ghost of his father. It is a vibrantly described and a deeply felt childhood. When Uncle Goa had applied for school admission for Salim Juma at the behest of his mother, issues of his origin came to the fore which is explained in the following extract from the novel.

‘Grandfather's name first’, said the application form, and Uncle Goa asked me. ‘Huseni,’ I said naming my renegade half-caste ancestor, and became Huseni Salim Juma for ever after. (*The Gunny* 124).

There is also a meticulous delineation of the nation's history in the novel as it had been shattered by political animosities on its road to independence, which comes about as Salim Juma reaches adolescence. With the surge in racial tension and

rioting, several members of his close-knit community leave the country and move to the West. Michel Bruneau says that memory plays a decisive role for the members of diaspora to preserve their relationship with their culture of origin.

Through migration, diaspora members have lost their material relationship to the territory of origin, but they can still preserve their cultural or spiritual relationship through memory. Territory or, more precisely, territoriality—in the sense of adapting oneself to a place in the host country—continues to play an essential role. (Bruneau 48)

Childhood and the years of growing up play a substantial role in almost all of Vassanji's novels. The role of Kulsum, Salim Juma's mother in *The Gunny Sack* is based upon the life of Vassanji's own mother. In an interview titled "History, Magic and Film," with Asma Sayed he mentions,

Obviously, my mother is a huge influence. I think *The Gunny Sack* is inspired by her. She's also suffered a lot; what a trauma it must've been not only to raise the five of us alone, but to raise several of my cousins - sometimes my uncle would leave his three children with us, so there were often eight of us together. It must have been very difficult for her. But I also remember those times as happy times – the bonds that were created then have lasted. .... Those childhood experiences are very memorable. (Sayed 285-286)

Vassanji's works are a testament to the fact how past operates and intervenes in one's life. Though at a particular stage one may feel that past has no place in a person's life, an adept reading of some of Vassanji's works will certainly help us think over it again. We all are creatures of the past and it has a paramount bearing on the present. He also emphasizes the role played by memory. His characters are people who survive on the periphery of the host societies dreaming of a home. Their lives are full of cherished memories and poignant connections with their homelands. Vassanji's treatment of history is exclusive and distinct. He portrays it with an ambiguous approach leaving much essentially upon the readers to decipher. We can understand the complicated nature of history in almost all his works. Vassanji opines that a writer plays a unique role as a historian. In one of his path-breaking essays titled "The Postcolonial Writer: Myth Maker and Folk Historian" he states that a writer is,

A preserver of the collective tradition, a folk historian and myth maker. He gives himself a history; he recreates the past, which exists only in memory and is otherwise obliterated, so fast has his world transformed. He emerges from the oral, preliterate, and unrecorded to literate. In many instances this reclamation of the past is the first serious act of writing. Having reclaimed it, having given himself a history, he literates himself to write about the present. To borrow an image from physics, he creates a field space- of words; images and landscapes- in which to work with, and instal the present. (Vassanji 63)

### **Edward Relph’s Concept of “Existential Insiderness and Outsiderness”**

Canada is the exiled space for Salim Juma and Vikram Lall alike. This is a place that reiterates the burdens of dislocation and melancholy. Salim Juma, Kamal Punja, Vikram Lall and Karsan Dargawalla have been to more than one place. Their experiences of travel, movements, migration and settlement (both temporary and permanent) make them carry the weight of their memory. This displacement makes the borders between home and the world and the private and the public perplexing. The resultant oscillation of memories concurrent with place supplements Edward Relph’s proposition of ‘insiderness’ and ‘outsiderness’ within a given place. Edward Relph expounds that there is a distinction between the experience of “insiderness” and ‘outsiderness’ within the human experience of place. Here is a gist of the same:

#### I. “Insiderness”

- (i) To belong to a place
- (ii) To have an identity within it
- (iii) The more one is inside the stronger one becomes and identity gets rooted there

#### II. “Outsiderness”

- (i) The existential outsiderness i.e. alienation from a particular place
- (ii) Antithesis of an unreflective sense of belonging that comes from being an existential insider (55).

All the characters taken up for this study encounter “existential outsiderness” when they are away from their homelands. In Korrenburg, Canada, Vikram feels alienated though he feels that it is a “calm retreat” (371). Here, he gets ample of time to think of the years gone by and to come up with a plan to get back to Kenya. It is going back to Kenya – his homeland that is foremost on his mind. Seema Chatterjee, his

friend in Canada asked him if he “unwillingly, unwittingly” belonged to that place i.e. Korrenburg, Vikram doubtfully asks himself, “Can I too learn to belong here?” (370) He desperately wanted to return to Kenya and settle things with the government and to come out clean.

Do I belong here—in this wonderful country where the seasons are orderly, days go past smoothly one after another? This cold moderation should after all be conducive to my dispassion? No. I feel strongly the stir of the forest inside me; I hear the call of the red earth, and the silent plains of the Rift Valley through which runs the railway that my people built and the bustle of River Road; I long for the harsh familiar caress of the hot sun. (*The In-Between* 371)

This same feeling reverberates in an essay titled “Canada and Me: Finding Ourselves” by Vassanji. He is strongly attached to Africa as he has his roots there. Of course, one cannot forget the place where he / she has childhood memories. As a young boy he used to accompany his mother on shopping and realized the struggles that a young widowed mother faced. He writes of his days in Africa where he spent his happy childhood,

I remain strongly attached to Africa, the continent of my birth; its music, the sight of its grasslands, its red earth, or its mighty Kilimanjaro, stir me to the core. I have happy memories of my childhood there. (Vassanji 20-21)

Similarly, in Edmonton in Canada, Kamal Punja is drawn towards Kilwa in his thoughts. If Vikram is nostalgic about Kenya, Kamal and Salim (*The Gunny Sack*) express their yearning for Tanzania. Kamal’s return to Kilwa after thirty-five years is an attestation to that. Salim Juma, however, cannot return as he is in exile; but his memories about the country of his birth are quite poignant. When they were students in Uganda, Shamim suggested that they too should leave for Canada following many Asians who were expelled by the Idi Amin regime, Kamal insisted that they should stay in Tanzania since it is their country.

“We could go,” she said softly. Then looked intently at him: “Why don’t we go?”

“Where? To Canada? You must be crazy—we are Tanzanians. We have families there. That’s our country.” (*The Magic* 263)

During a visit to India with other doctors, Kamal and Shamim felt that “India was special” (276) and that “India had thrilled them and they all agreed Mumbai felt like home—meaning Dar – but multiplied a hundredfold” (276). As he was in India, Kamal was driven by an impulse to visit “the town in Gujarat where his great-grandfather PunjaDevraj had hailed from” (276). He visited “Verawal, in a far-flung corner of Gujarat” (277). This visit made him realise that he was connected to India and had his origins in this place. He observed,

This was an area prone to drought, which was why young men historically left its shores to seek their fortunes on the coast of East Africa. All the Asians Kamal had known in Dar had their origins in this peninsula. (*The Magic* 277)

In *The Assassin's Song*, though Karsan was in America, he could not break his ties with Pirbaag. Karsan's life in Pirbaag as an adolescent, as an aspiring student at Boston-Harvard, his married life with Marge Thompson in Canada, his new identity as Krishna Fazl while working as a Professor in a college in British Columbia, his familial life and tragedy in the form of his only son's death, his return to India, his research period at the Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla and finally his getting back to his roots and assuming the role of the Saheb of Pirbaag are evidence to the fact that place determines one's experiences and thereby plays a decisive role in the shaping of identity. Place means being in the world. It is “primary because it is the experiential fact of our existence” (Cresswell, 32). It is where our lives are enacted and the veritable bedrock of human meaning and social relations. Throughout the novel, Karsan is seen travelling to many places and settling down (of course, temporarily) in some of them. Each of his experiences with place instils a new acuity to his life. In fact his identity gets moulded by the experiences that he had underwent (that is also to say, the places he has been to).

Karsan's return to India, to his roots, is an impulsive response to his brother's telegram informing him of their father's catastrophic demise in the gory communal riots that had wreaked havoc on millions of lives. The neutral shrine of Pirbaag that once upheld the lofty ideals of secularism was in ruins now. Karsan encounters this abject reality of life on his return to Haripir and takes up the very role of the Saheb which he once ran away from. His extensive research about Nur Fazl's identity as an assassin in the Middle Ages in Central Asia infuses in him a new-found zeal which enables him to undertake the role of the Saheb of Pirbaag; of course in a different manner. He does not possess the poised and the dignified aura that his father had when he was the Saheb of Pirbaag; rather Karsan is more down-to-earth and

endorses realistic principles for the betterment of the society. He is the care-taker of the shrine as undertakes many activities of reform for the community. Life comes full circle as he ends up taking the very responsibility which he once ran away from. He gets back to his roots and achieves a sense of belonging. Here, Vassanji brings in the theme of return which we can see in his other novels too. Finally, Karsan gets back to his own place 'Pirbaag' after a considerable sojourn in many countries. With utmost confidence and credibility he declares that he is the "caretaker of Pirbaag" (367). His return to the very place Pirbaag which he kept running away from demonstrates that one cannot let go off one's roots. Karsan remarks, "Do we always end up where we really belong? Do I belong here" (364)

Vassanji's *No New Land* differs slightly from his other novels. The novel opens on ambivalent note as the two contradicting concepts of place and identity collide at the very start. This is a precursor to the conflicts in Nurdin's life that follow in quick succession. The Lalanis belonged to the Shamsi community which had migrated to Canada in pursuit of better prospects. Their arrival in Canada from Dar es Salaam is marked by anxiety and apprehensions regarding their future. The plot spins around the predicament of the Lalanis who are transplanted into a land of alluring potential but also laborious struggle. Nurdin Lalani, the protagonist of the novel represents those emigrants who envisage that Canada is the land that heralds bounties. The following quotation from the novel reveals how the "ghosts from the past" cannot be shaken off.

We are but creatures of our origins, and however stalwartly we march forward, paving new roads, seeking new worlds, the ghosts from our pasts stand not far behind and are not easily shaken off. (*No New* 9)

Nurdin Lalani's family felt they could attain prospects of a decent standard of living and a secured identity. The plight of the Lalanis in Tanzania was dismal and their economic sustenance was minimal. That's the reason they had decided to migrate to Canada. They managed to survive by doing odd jobs. Zera, Nurdin's wife successfully handles domestic pressure to earn a living. It is the younger generation that managed to find a way out for themselves in the diaspora much comfortably and effortlessly than Nurdin and Zera. Nurdin contemplated the attitude that Fatima, his daughter had adopted to deal with the new world, new people and new ideas.

For the crime of being her father when he wasn't anything like what she had in mind. She was ashamed of this little Paki-shitty-stan of Don Mills, as she

called it. She didn't belong here, she would pull herself out of this condition: everything about her attitude suggested that. She would rise to where they had neither the courage nor the ability to reach. Where had she picked up this abrasiveness, this shrillness, this hatred of her origins? (*No New* 167)

Nurdin's children noticeably imbibed the Canadian ways of living and even despised their father who carried out menial jobs. Fatima disengaged herself from the Shamsi community in Don Mills. In fact, she was more akin to the Canadian way of life and strived to be one of them. Interestingly, characters like Jamal, Romesh and Sushila have an advantage in the diaspora and chose Canada as their new home instead. In the beginning of the novel we get to know that Nurdin is charged of sexual assault. This event has been mentioned in the very first pages by the novelist to draw our attention to the crashing of the ideals and dreams of Nurdin. He could not bring himself to terms with the incident.

It is, thus, a clash between dreams and reality for Nurdin as he is incapable of coming to terms with the awkward circumstances he found himself in. Nurdin is the "existential outsider," in Relph's terms, in these circumstances as there was a vast chasm between his dreams and reality. On the contrary, Nurdin's children stand for the transformed Asian-Canadians who are not troubled by their pedigree or nostalgic reminiscence. Nanji and Jamal too moved to Canada but Nanji felt that his dreams were not fulfilled whereas Jamal survived by doing odd jobs. Here home turns out to be an unachievable dream. The promises that Canada once held for Nurdin are unfulfilled. "No new land" is thus, "no new home" as the same experience of disillusionment that the Lalanis had left behind in Dar es Salaam gets repeated in Don Mills. Ian Chambers is of the opinion that, "The migrant's sense of being rootless, of living between worlds, between a lost past and a non-integrated present, is perhaps the most fitting metaphor of this (post)modern condition." (27)

In the novel there is no indication that any of the members of the African Indian community are in contact with their original homeland, India. Dar es Salaam, rather than India is the place of memory for the characters. They do, however, correspond with Dar es Salaam, especially Zera, who consulted with Missionary over traditional Shamsi reactions to events of daily life in Toronto and requested him to join them in the West. Vassanji thus finely validates that the act of looking back, which is often enveloped in nostalgia and a longing to return, forms part of a multifaceted psychological negotiation of guilt. Vera Alexander writes,

The Afro-Asian network of immigrants to which the protagonists belong plays

an important but ambivalent role in their trials of initiation. In practical terms, the community facilitates their access to the 'new land' by providing help-lines and familiar social structures. The safety in numbers alleviates the newcomers' sense of inadequacy and insecurity. On the other hand, the modern lifestyle in Canada exposes the immigrants to problems for which they have no traditional panacea. (200)

It needs to be comprehended that India is the 'place of memory' for certain characters whereas for some others it is Africa. Characters like Karsan Dargawalla in *The Assassin's Song*, Mrs. Lall (Vikram Lall's mother) Mr. Anand Lal in *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall*, Dhanji Govindji and Ji Bai in *The Gunny Sack* identify India as their place of memory. Such a place gave them identity and roots. Characters like Kamal Punja in *The Magic of Saida*, Nurdin Lalani, his wife Zera in *No New Land* and Salim Juma in *The Gunny Sack* are seen longing for Africa.

### **Conclusion**

In the modern times, diaspora can arguably become a metaphor for life and identity. For diasporic identity, spatiality is of particular importance especially as mobility and resettlement shape both experience and imagination. Diasporic mobility and resettlement connect at least two places, while the simultaneity of migration of a group to more than one place creates the conditions for networked relations across places. Diasporic identities, in this context, become complex and changing systems and the position that individuals or groups take in spatial matrices define many of the identities. R. Radhakrishnan mentions that "the diasporic location is the space of the hyphen that tries to coordinate, within an evolving relationship, the identity politics of one's place of origin with that of one's present home" (Radhakrishnan, xiii).

Space in diaspora is not singular; it brings together meaningful relations and forms of practices within that code. It also carries social meanings which are always pluralistic in nature. The home, the public, the city and the national within the transnational space form layers of the spheres of belonging. It is the context where social relations, communication and action take place. This activity in turn shapes the meanings of identity and community. The domestic, the local, the public, the national and the transnational form an interconnected spatial matrix, where possibilities of belonging, for choosing not to belong and the existence of multiple communities emerge. In addition, the geography of social relations is changing as

much as the relations between spaces. They often stretch out over defined spaces but they meet in places that become unique points of their intersection.

Vassanji has envisaged a multidimensional concept of home as he bestrides the three continents with their socio-political twists and turns. This results in the creation of a hyphenated identity and an exilic precondition so much so that the tendency of home away from home develops on one hand and on the other no particular home as such. These circumstances are deftly pictured in his works. When asked in an interview as to why he wrote essentially about homeland Vassanji says he “was pushed by a sense of loss—maybe just a perceived loss—which later turned out to be real, of a homeland, of stories, of history, and all of that which—it seemed to me—would soon be forgotten and lost” (Sayed 288). Cynthia Sugars notes how the migration histories are primarily the products of memory,

The interplay of private and public accounts, individual and collective memory, as well as the oral and written, combine to produce a chronicle that strives to make sense of migration histories as they affect individuals and their communities for generations to come. (584-585)

The place of memory held close by the characters conspicuously propels the discourse of rootedness and belongingness further accentuated by a quest for home. Vassanji interrogates his own community’s history in his works. He writes at length about the Gujarati traders who migrated to Africa in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Africa and America are the background for his portrayal of Indian lives. Though he migrated to Canada from the United States, his emotional bonding with Africa is unequivocally truthful. A sense of identity and nostalgia about one’s homeland has always been exhibited in the writings of the Indian diaspora. Writing from a hyphenated space M. G. Vassanji illustrates that multicultural identities constantly get ripped apart with respect to their language, class, race and gender differences. These disparities get transmuted and reconfigured in the translocal spaces. The notions of homeland i.e. the places of memory are remembered over and over again. Consequently, the emotional, political and cultural affiliations of the characters become inextricably linked to their identities.

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