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Theme of Diaspora and Exile in M.G. Vassanji's *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall* and *The Gunny Sack*

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Abstract:

Exile is the migration of people from homeland to host land. Such a passage may be voluntary, involuntary or a combination of both factors. In the novels of M.G. Vassanji, there are many varieties of migrations and exiles. The protagonists in his novels yearn to be treated as African natives. Yet, this is just a wishful dream. The plight and predicament of these diasporic settlers is marked by discrimination. They desire to belong but the Africans do not treat them as natives even though they were born in Africa. M.G. Vassanji has portrayed the experiences of the Indian Diaspora in East Africa whose identities are affected by historical and political elements. His prose is successful in capturing the pangs of dilemma which vex a diasporic identity, be it the old diasporic subjectivity or the new generation. His works depict the double migration of his South Asian characters.

Keywords:

Diaspora, Exile, Racial Discrimination, Ethnicity, Colonialism, Resistance

For the most part, people become exiles today as a matter of choice. People like M.G. Vassanji go to the U.S.A. for higher studies. Countries like the U.S.A. offer scholarships to the students coming from those areas where better facilities are scarce. This exile is self-imposed exile. It is shocking that the native people have not developed liberal attitudes. The colour of the skin generates most of the diasporic problems. The blacks assert that white is good but black is better. These are petty things. Man longs to get over these prejudices. Yet, these concepts remain pious and virtuous longings. The concept of likeableness needs to be updated in the modern times. Those who go on exile for nobler causes should not experience the disabilities which were the lot of the exiles of yesterday. Germany, Japan and many other countries are experiencing shortage of professionally trained people. In countries like India, such people are available on a large scale. Such self-imposed exiles should not cause any heart-burning in the natives.

The diasporic problems of exile which have been stressed by M.G. Vassanji in all his fiction highlight the disabilities that the Indian diaspora has experienced for a very long time. The diasporic families in both *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall* and *The Gunny Sack* migrate to Africa in search of better circumstances. There is an unfortunate fact in their case that they have no plan to return to their homelands. The descendants of Dhanji Govindji continue to prolong their stay in East African countries. They are too myopic to read the writing on the wall. They have boundless faith in the

efficiency and effectiveness of the British colonial rule. So, they have no sympathy for the nationalist movements. Dhanji Govindji rebukes Huseni for showing sympathy with the Maji Maji anti-colonial upsurge. The same indifference and obtuseness is maintained towards the Mau Mau rebels. Rather, the Indian settlers and migrants express their horror and discomfort at the extremist activities of the African nationalist movements. It is natural that the Africans should continue to view the Dukawallahs with suspicion and apprehension. When African leaders take over, they take active steps to squeeze the rich diasporic businessmen out of their business firms and factories. They subject the Indians to harassment because their prejudices against the diasporic settlers are running very deep. The outcome is a second exile when these settlers run helter-skelter to save their souls. This is indeed harsh, but the anger and bitterness has been building in the African psyche for a very long time. So, such reactions, though unjustified, can't be ruled out.

Each case involving diasporic families is unique. Generalizations, if made, will get riddled with contradictions. When Dhanji Govindji finds himself at the end of the tether economically, the only solution that he has before him is to run to South Africa. This exile is under the force of circumstances. Had he stayed on in India, he would not have faced lynching or elimination. Yet, Gujratis would often sail to East Africa and grow rich. Vassanji cites many names of the Gujratis who made it good in Africa. Anand Lall Peshawri came in Africa as one of the labourers who had been recruited from various towns of Punjab with the specific purpose of laying railway lines to connect one side of Africa with the other. These labourers had arrived here with a type of indentured contracts. Anand Lall Peshawri found that his brothers had made it impossible for him to return to his village. That small village could not accommodate two money lenders which compelled Anand Lall Peshawri and many other labourers to sink or swim with Africa. They were marking discretion the better part of valour.

The diasporic settlers need sympathy, attachment and love like all human beings. In *The Gunny Sack*, at first, Dhanji Govindji sought companionship with Taratibu, a black slave. This association results in the birth of Huseni. He is the inter-racial product with unconcealed enmity for Dhanji Govindji. The diasporic experience results in this racial hybridization with very dangerous consequences. Huseni returns home when he is under the threat of arrest. He marries Moti but runs away from home after differences with his father. The stigma of mixed parentage did not leave the family for many generations. When Faruq taunts Salim as half-caste, he wonders: "so much information simply hoarded for years" (*TGS*, 272). The memories and shadows of black ancestry haunt the descendents like ghosts. In *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall*, there is almost an identical situation when Molabux, a friend and companion of Anand Lall Peshawri marries an African girl who is subsequently named as Sakina. Vassanji seems to hold the opinion that inter-racial unions hardly thrive or prosper. In *The Gunny Sack*, an inter-racial alliance has been suggested very strongly. Yet all this ends in smoke. When Amina brings her American friend named Mark, the friendship flounders

in the end. Thus, in case of intimate friendship between Deepa and Njoroge also, the end is fatal. Somewhere in his psyche, Vassanji tries to suggest that the intimate relationships between Indian exiles and local blacks are disastrous and devastating.

The diasporic experiences are very largely conditioned by the generation to which such people belong. When Huseni, the product of an inter-racial affair tries to hobnob with the local blacks, the Indian patriarch reminds him that he belongs to the Solar race. As the next generations grow up in close association with local people, their abhorrence and dislike for the black people dwindle. Yet, these are isolated cases. Whenever children display some tendency to befriend the local natives, parents and guardians show their firm opposition to such wild romances. Sheila Lall uses all her resources to thwart the possible marriage between Deepa and Njoroge. The Indian diasporic settlers labour under the misconception that African people have their eyes on the daughters of diasporic settlers. When such a proposition is mooted by African leaders, the Indians do not come out in its support in any manner. The diasporic prejudices of the Indians urge them to avoid marital closeness or intimacy with the blacks.

In the colonial period, the African social set up was compartmentalised. The White British had no craze or keenness to hobnob with the Blacks at the level of personal intimacy. They were superiors trying to lord it over the blacks. So, intimacy leading to marriage was out of question. The Indian immigrants were an in-between class, neither the white ones nor the black ones. Yet, they were even keener than the whites to maintain their separate identity. They were neither willing nor ready to enter into intimate alliances with the whites on the one hand and blacks on the other. It was a well-entrenched caste system of some sort. Migration from India and settlement in Africa created identity problems for the Indians. P. Shailja asserts that the diasporas "refuse to engage with a wider notion of the public, and retreat into their home and culture... they carry their 'little India' with them" (18). They thought that the best way to preserve their uniqueness and identity was to keep personal alliances at an arm's length. Such instances abound in both the novels. Kulsum is very active to preserve the identity of her children. She opposes Begum's alliance with an Englishman tooth and nail but she is unable to prevent it. She imposes many conditions on Sona when he is migrating to the U.S.A. These remind us of Polonius's exhortations to Laertes when he is leaving Denmark for higher education. Kulsum is a bulwark of orthodoxy and conventionality. Thus, the bonds of orthodoxy and water-tight compartmentalisation appear to be giving way at the seams. Deepa and Njoroge have been childhood companions. Personal preference overrides all horrors of colour and race. The possibility of inhuman and uncivilised walls collapsing with the passage of time can't be ruled out.

Colonialism has a positive and affirmative impact on the identity of migrant settlers. Dhanji Govindji and his descendants cooperate and collaborate first with the German colonialism and later on with the British colonialism. As the colonizers and

the Shamsis are both aliens, they have a natural and mutual comradeship and companionship. It would be improper to suggest that there is an open and overt understanding of this type, yet the alliance between these two groups is active and operative. The story with the Lall family is also the same. They bask in the sunshine of British colonialism but when the native leaders take over, their position becomes perilous and precarious. Identity means how people stand vis-à-vis one another. It is safe to assert that the diasporic settlers suffer an erosion of identity. Salman Rushdie suggests: "To migrate is certainly to lose language and home, to be defined by others, to become invisible or even worse, a target: it is to experience deep changes and wrenches in the soul" (210). As the situation passes from colonialism to post colonialism, from the 'in-between' men they slip and slide to 'nowhere' men. They lose all their gains and make ignominious exits under threat of even death.

In the two novels, viz., *The Gunny Sack* and *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall*, the diasporic immigrants belong to different religious groups. It is said that Vassanji is at home when depicting the trials and tribulations of the Shamsi Muslim community. Yet, his portrayal of Anand Lall Peshawri does not seem to lack the necessary polish and finish. The two novels depict two cultures having some features in common as well as some other features which are distinct. It is natural that there should be a sizeable cultural segment showing western customs and traditions. Some Arabs are also present and their cultures figure here and there. Their very presence is enough to highlight some cultural diversity. In the main, the dominant segment or section pertains to the native people. Thus, both the novels are suffused and immersed in a unique brand of multiculturalism. The truest form of multiculturalism is the one where all varieties are shown equal respect and equal tolerance. Such utopian idealism sounds romantic and fanciful even on paper, yet many types of culture float and flock in the ethos and ambience of the African colonies. This situation undergoes radical change when colonialism yields place to post colonialism. The type of multi-cultural set up that the Africans offer after the political change over is oppressive, aggressive and repressive in the extreme. Exit and escape are the only options for the Indian diasporic settlers. They seem to be most unprepared for this heart-breaking and inhuman diasporic experience of exile. They have no readymade option or solution to prolong an honourable existence. So, they must endure what they can't cure. They must pack up and make a beeline for the West or the American continent. What fate awaits them in the form of diasporic experience of exile in the new set up is all sorted up in the unpredictable mysteries of the future. There are hopes as well as fears in life. It is the lot and luck of man. Life is always a vector between hopes and fears.

In both the novels, people belonging to different races are forced to co-exist. The Africans would look upon their deities and even their superstitions as the most hallowed and holy. It is the way of the world that all religious, cultural and other groups hold their perceptions about life to be the dearest. The most natural outcome is prejudice or pride and prejudice. Vassanji has been true to human nature even in the matter of

depiction of racial prejudices. These negative and narrow views are at work both in *The Gunny Sack* and in *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall*. Deepa's mother can never brook the possibility of playing with hybrid grandchildren, if Njoroge marries her daughter. The Europeans can't help frowning at what the Indians, the Africans, the Asians regard as sacred and sanctimonious. One may even question the wisdom of driving the Europeans out prematurely. It is true that they were taking their pound of flesh because their one and only motive was colonial exploitation. Yet, the service they were rendering was specialized. Naturally services are always procured at a premium. It is, however, a moot point. Home rule is better than the western administration. Thus, racial prejudices run amuck in both the novels or else how can we account for Kulsum's opposition to the inter-racial marriage of her children?

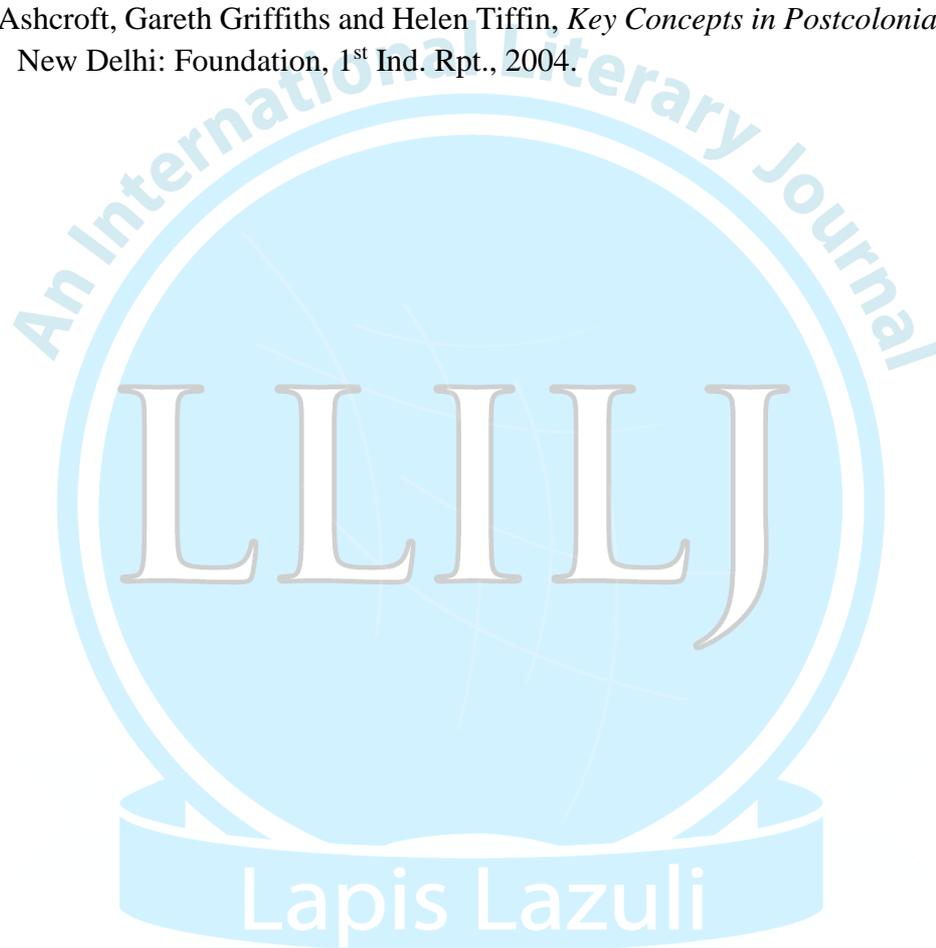
The post-colonial theorists do not subscribe to the concept that home is something substantial, factual or solid. They feel that home is more of a construct than some natural concept. Rushdie has gone to the extent of bringing out a full length book under the title *Imaginary Homelands*. Avtar Brah feels that home is "a mythic place of desire" (192) in diasporic imagination. With the diasporic communities, says McLeod, "homelessness becomes primarily a mental construct built from the incomplete odds and ends of memory that survive from the past. It exists in a fractured, discontinuous relationship with the present" (211). The migrants wish to return home but this desire proves futile. The Shamsi community in *The Gunny Sack* first makes Matamu their home. They go deeper into Africa when hostilities break out between Germany and England. Later on, it is Dar es Salaam which is their home. When conditions become inhospitable with the advent of post colonialism, they go to western countries under one excuse or the other. Sona goes for education, Begum's alibi is marriage and Salim's exit is something more mobile than stationary. Which place should such people look upon as home? In *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall* also, home is more like a mirage than reality. The Lall family makes Nakuru their home for a long time. Later on, they shift to Nairobi because of Mau Mau disturbance. At the inception of local rule, the condition of the Indian diaspora becomes more and more slippery. Vikram Lall becomes an agent of the local politicians and uses his influence to safeguard the interests of his kith and kin. The final relief that Deepa gets comes to her only in Canada. Thus, the diasporic experience of exile in the case of most of the migrants follows a routine pattern. They settle at a place and set up a home, only to leave it in the face of risky hazards. Home is a mirage whose margins continue to fade and whose existence is most uncertain and unsure. These people set up homes to lose them and this is repeated again and again. Pathetic and cataclysmic are the diasporic experiences of exile. The case of Vikram Lall needs special study and analysis. He hopes against hope that he may somehow manage to hold onto his tenuous home in Africa. Vassanji does not tell us whether this dream would be transformed into reality or not. Different generations must react differently. Ji Bai grows sentimental, returns to India and endears the old home and its walls. Salim Juma does not wish to return to Africa. Thus, different people in different generations and in different situations, react subjectively to what they regard as their home.

Ethnicity denotes, according to Ashcroft et al, “human variation in terms of culture tradition, language, social pattern and ancestry” (80). Race is another term which has been discredited in the modern times. It is natural that people belonging to different ethnic groups must find a wide gulf or chasm separating them on a large number of scores. The Africans’ opposition to the Indians is an in-built part of the social set up structured by the colonial rulers. With the advent of post-colonial independence and the passing over of the strings of power into the hands of the Africans, the ethnic advantages of yesterday would set in a reverse chain reaction. Thus, ethnic prejudice which made diasporic Indian settlers shine in the reflected glory of the British, would after independence load the dice heavily against the Indian diasporic settlers. The Indians had some apprehensions that the tide would turn against them, yet they were never prepared for a sweeping anti-Indian upheavals. This is perhaps the most tragic diasporic experience of exile faced by the Indian migrants in Africa. The anti- Indian sentiments run so high among the Africans that they forget all their earlier relationships. Even Omari, the tailor, wants to grab Kulsum’s shop. In *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall* also, persistent African onslaughts are mounted against the possessions of Deepa’s in-laws. They escape only through the dubious influence of Vikram Lall. Vikram’s in-laws also face a similar threat and escape only by gifting jewellery sets, though their escape was at the behest of Vikram Lall’s interventions.

In *Beginning Postcolonialism*, John McLeod asserts, “Racial differences are best thought of as political constructions which serve the interests of certain groups of people” (110). People do not indulge in racial prejudices for fun but for gains and returns. Thus, in the competitive domain of life, people are ready to use even those devices which are hardly upright, to secure petty advantages. Racial discrimination is a tool that never misses the mark. In case of Shivji, shame, racial discrimination is at work against him at each and every step. In his early days in the National Service, he was tormented and harassed by the African recruits. The most classic case of this prejudice is the denial of promotion to Shivji Shame in spite of the A-one quality of his work. The hot reception that Vikram Lall gets is also there sult of racial discrimination. During the early days of their relationship, Amina always addresses Salim Juma as Indian. The protagonists in both the novels, Vikram Lall and Salim Juma, yearn to be treated as African natives. Yet, this is just a wishful dream. The plight and predicament of these diasporic settlers is marked by discrimination. They desire to belong but the Africans do not treat them as natives, even though they were born in Africa. Thus, we see that through these two novels, Vassanji has portrayed the experiences of the diaspora in exile from multiple angles.

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