

The Elusive Love, Home and Return in M.G. Vassanji's *The Magic of Saida*

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Abstract

The unique identity of the nowhere man accounts for the ambiguity that characterises the writings of Vassanji. Drawn from the different strata of life, his protagonists reflect the predicament of the exile. In *The Magic of Saida* (2012), the sweeping tale of reminiscences, nostalgia and childhood love, 'return' is presented as enigmatic and inconclusive. Despite the material abundance Kamal Punja, the successful doctor from Edmonton is unsatiated. Unable to forget the by-gones he goes in search of the roots the memories of which remain evergreen during the sojourn in the host land. Centring on the notions of home and identity, the novel depicts the struggles of the protagonist who rediscovers himself during the frantic search for his beloved.

Keywords: Reminiscences, nostalgia, childhood, home, return and journey

"Travel is many things. It is an escape from obligation, an attempt at seeking new perspectives, a matter of privilege or exchange, a way to be strange among strangers, a life narrative, a seeking of self. The journey outward is also a journey inward. Travel is motion and motion of the mind" (Fussell 13-16). Travel is a liberating process. Instead of being tied down to a stagnant lifestyle and culture travel endows one with numerous ways of emancipation. The journeys that an individual undertakes invigorate him or her and broaden the perspectives, and the writings centring on the movement from place to place depict events in a realistic vein. Travel denotes movement, not only of the body but of the mind as well. Those who travel in order to escape from the stark reality, ironically find themselves steeped in memories from which no escape is possible.

In English poetry as well as prose, travel writings occupy a significant place. The writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Ernest Hemingway, Charles Dickens, D.H. Lawrence and Thomas Hardy as well as the soul-stirring verse of John Keats and William Wordsworth explore the amazing lands and trysts with the unfamiliar and unknown.

Journeys undertaken by creative minds inevitably prompt them to indulge in the production of the genre of writing known as ‘travel writing’. Vassanji tries to rediscover his homeland, though it is not the place where he was born and raised. Restlessness is embedded in the nomadic life, and the same characterises the immigrant life portrayed in the oeuvre of Vassanji.

For a writer like M.G. Vassanji who has spent many years in the United States and Canada ‘home’ is an ambiguous term. Through his writings MGJ provides an authentic account of Africa, home of his youthful days and the inseparable links to India. His childhood has been made unforgettable by the days spent in Kenya and Tanzania; the magical charm of which enliven his writings, bestowing upon them a unique identity. India being known and unknown the memories of it are kept alive even as he settles in a remote land. Cast away from the homeland, he settles first in the U.S. and then in Canada. In Vassanji, the universal and indigenous meet, and his fiction, in turn, reflects the dichotomy between the philosophies of the east and west. Typical of the situation, he possesses multiple identities, and the writings produced contain the quest and craving for the motherland.

For Vassanji journey is a liberating experience. The personal and impersonal interfuse, culminating in the emergence of fiction marked by authenticity. Travel writings often turn into the personal memoir and signify the inward journey; the tryst with one’s self. What prompts the author to undertake the journey to India is his intense desire to familiarise himself with the place left behind in the remote past. He wonders, “Yet how many people go to the birthplace of their grandparents with such a heartload of expectation and momentousness, such a desire to find themselves in everything they see?” (9).

At times one travels to escape from the drudgery of life or from the harrowing memories, yet one remains enslaved by the same. Visits to the homeland generates in MGJ the feeling that ties cannot be severed easily. The visitor feels obliged to those who welcome wholeheartedly, fostering togetherness and comradeship. Vassanji’s quest for India stems from the quest for his own identity, “India, on the other hand, seemed to do something to the soul; give a certain ease, a sense of homecoming, quite another kind of nostalgia” (X).

The Magic of Saida (2002) by M.G. Vassanji unfolds the relentless efforts of Kamal Punja who sets out in search of his childhood love even as he is haunted by memories of the ancestral land. Remorse plays havoc with the life of the protagonist who feels that he

abandoned his sweetheart in order to have a lucrative career. Towards the end he seems obsessed with the thought of the imminent death which he takes upon himself as the nemesis for the wrongdoing. The novel is a saga of childhood love, reminiscences and nostalgia. Vassanji attributes his preoccupation with the past to his inability to reconcile, his dissatisfaction with the partial migration and state of being nowhere. Memory plays a pivotal role in the unfolding of the action of the novel, “..... things change, you’ve changed; but he couldn’t stop the images flitting through his mind, couldn’t suppress the outrage..... five minutes from what had been his home, a short walk along the creek from the lagoon where he would meet her, where he last saw her. What hope could it give him, this memory’s violation? (12-13). In *TMOS*, Saida is projected as the symbol of home relinquished. In the childhood days she exerted a great influence on Kamal, and it was by the quirk of fate that the boy had to part ways with her. It is only after the departure that he becomes aware of the all-pervading presence of Saida in his life. The girl remains emblematic of the beacon of hope that continues to ignite his paths amidst the encircling gloom.

‘Return’ constitutes a recurring trope in immigrant writings, and it symbolises the failed quest. In the words of Saidiya Hartman, “The disappointment is that there is no going back to a former condition. Loss remakes you. Return is as much about the world to which you no longer belong as it is about the one in which you have yet to make a home” (100). In *TMOS*, ‘return’ is an enigmatic phenomenon. Kamal’s home is Edmonton as well as Africa. His children find their African lineage despicable. They do not have the sense of belonging to Tanzania and view the place and people with detachment. Running parallel to the story of Kamal is that of Ed Markham, the Englishman who is the manager of a local hotel. Initially, Punja looks upon him scornfully as the latter leads the life of a vagabond. Eventually, he realises, “He’ll be buried next to the ocean that brought him here, and you’ll lie embalmed under several feet of snow in the middle of a continent you don’t quite belong to” (79). Vassanji bestows upon Punja the multiple identities of a vagabond, a tourist and pilgrim. Though he establishes his career in Canada, haven for settlers, Punja is unable to uproot the past which makes him restless. The comments of Eddy Harris are relevant here. He observes, “There is a line that connects that place with this one, the place where we come from and the place we find ourselves, those lives and our lives. And I longed to follow that line” (14). In *TMOS*, Saida stands as the symbol of the past, and it is the longing for her that forces Kamal to return to the ancestral land. The enigmatic character serves as the connecting link between

the past and present. On his return, Kamal the protagonist ruminates over the relevance of historical events such as the arrival of sultans, the colonial wars and so on, “The past haunted him from the ruins and the graves, it was there in the references to the Germans who had ruled there once, and the slaves who were sold there, he heard it in his mother’s tales and he heard it recited- majestically-by the old poet, Saida’s grandfather” (9).

To Vassanji, it appears that nothing is more alluring than the past. Kamal revels in being a member of diaspora. When abandoned by the closest of relations, he finds refuge in the company of his cousins, but very soon realises that ‘shelter’ is quite an evasive term. Even the term, ‘home’ is polysemic. Home, for Kamal, is where reminiscences keep one tied. Edmonton provides him with luxuries and amenities, yet he remains unsatiated. The inability to cope with the present is a trait predominant in his character. Despite the material prosperity and illustrious career, he craves for the presence of Saida. It is the infinite hope of being united with her that culminates in the encounter with the mysterious sorceress at Minazi Minne. Kamal has the shock of his life as Bibi Ramzani informs him that the child, she had given birth to was brutally murdered. Thus ‘return’ is rendered all the more enigmatic and inconclusive with Kamal’s much-awaited encounter with his beloved at the labyrinthine Minazi Minne which leaves him embarrassed and penitent. Kamal Punja is a man of intricate identities. He is not simply a nomad or a vagabond who still owes allegiance to the homeland or maintains cordial relations with the natives. In the settled land, Kamal considers himself one among the locals. However, the natives look upon him only as a visitor. Vassanji presents him as the personification of the nowhere man. The novel brings into focus the notions of identity and home that remain ambiguous. The one who delves into the past can define, comprehend and locate oneself. The conclusion that is reached at, at the end of the novel may be vague and indefinite, but it signifies the painstaking process of rediscovering oneself.

The concept of roots remains intricate as long as one is uprooted, made to live in the foreign land and prompted to travel back to the place of origin. Multiple transplantings render the notion of home complex the best instance of which are the sojourns of protagonist Kamal who fails to tie himself to a single place. Kilwa, Dar-es-Salaam, Edmonton and India contribute to the formulation of his identity. He is lured away by the myth of return. The concept of home does not signify a fixed or a stable centre:

“Mama, will I be chased out of the country because I am an Indian?”

“Not at all! Who told you that? You are an Indian.”

“But you call me an Indian every time. Everybody calls me an Indian! Except the Indians themselves” (36).

‘Return’ conveys different meanings one among which is the return of the immigrant to the native land when the time is ripe. The yearning to go back can be an individual as well as the collective wish of the exiled community. Monica Ali terms it as “Going Home Syndrome” (Ali, 2003, as cited in Rollins, 2018). According to Chih-ming-Wang it is the “homebound imaginary” (Wang, 2013, as cited in Rollins, 2018). The immigrant’s stay in the settled land is often looked upon as a sojourn as he or she eventually returns to the place of origin. Richness or a prosperous career fails to satisfy the itinerant dreamer, and hence the relevance of the roots in immigrant life. ‘Return’ and ‘quest’ are recurring themes in exile writings. In the opinion of Wang, these stories of quest and return are “quests for reconciliation” and “im/possible returns” whose journeys are searches for a definition of self and home “that seek reconciliation with the past, with the dead and with “unforgivable acts” (Wang, 2013, as cited in Rollins, 2018). The attempts of reconciliation between the present and past lead the exile to self-discovery.

TMOS sheds light on the dilemma of the nowhere man who grapples with the question of identity crisis. Every country that is visited contributes to Kamal’s identity. The hyphenated identity; the mixture of the African and Indian ancestries leaves Kamal in the middle space. He belongs to an ethnic community that has been displaced twice. There are certain factors that bring the lovers together; the loss of their fathers makes them seek love, care and refuge elsewhere. Forlorn, they cling to each other. For the one whose world is built on memories alone, nothing else seems so mighty and alive. Kamal is disillusioned as the attempts of reconciliation with his mother fail. In Dar-es-Salaam he seeks the company of Sabini, the tailor. Eventually, the latter is compelled to leave the place. The yearning to go back to the roots characterises the lives of the nowhere men stranded on isles of alienation and estrangement. The inability to cope with the present and past which haunts forever prompts Kamal to return to the motherland. Once the plans are executed, he finds the pull of the roots irresistible. Saida, the childhood love whom he abandoned for a prosperous career remains evergreen in the memory, and Kamal succumbs to her call. Towards the end of the novel the deranged woman is spotted at Minazi Minne from where Kamal is rescued by his

companions. It is Saida who epitomises hope and promise, leading him to the inevitable return:

“Sing a shairi for me, Saida. You used to.”

“I have forgotten.”

“How can you forget?”

“A wife forgets many things. She forgets her childhood.”

“Well, I am your childhood and I am back...” (249)

Saida who illuminates the past and present alike remains the greatest influence on Kamal Punja throughout his life. It is Saida who symbolises the lost heaven in search of which he wanders from pillar to post wherever he goes. In *TMOS*, Vassanji presents ‘return’ as a phenomenon which can be interpreted at various levels. The protagonist’s home is not only Edmonton but also Africa:

“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 have 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?” (222)

It appears by implication that the identities of Kamal and Vassanji are ambiguous as they are intertwined among three places; India, East Africa and Canada. In *Tourists and Vagabonds* (1996), Bauman states, “We go on moving; the tourists and the vagabonds, the half-tourists and the half-vagabonds that we have become in the post-modern society of relentless consumption” (26). In the opinion of Amin Malak, one of the eminent critics of the

novels of Vassanji, it is the post-colonial condition that forms the underlying motif of the works. According to Salman Rushdie migrants stand for the chutnification of the world, “melange, hotpotch, a bit of this and bit of that” (394). Vassanji’s fiction is noteworthy for the meticulous account of details and unbiased outlook of a historian with which he analyses people, events and situations. In the opinion of Vassanji, 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 install the present (“The Postcolonial Writer” 63).

As an itinerant author, Vassanji discusses a few similarities between the act of travelling and those of reading and writing. Books are miniature journeys as they mentally transport the readers from one place to the other and enable them to visualise the intangible. Michel Butor opines that reading is equivalent to a “double journey” (71). It requires physical movements to some extent, “there is (at least) the path of the eye from sign to sign, like all sorts of itineraries which can often, but not always, be grossly simplified as the progression along a line from a point of departure to a point of arrival” (70). Neelima Kanwar elaborates upon the similarities between *The Assassin’s Song* (2007) and *The Magic of Saida* (2012); both the works examine the dominant past in everyman’s life and pose questions related to existence and the human condition. The novels offer answers to numerous spiritual, existential and metaphysical queries. *TMOS* possesses an open-minded conclusion, “He became still, and in these moments the girl several times looked from him to me, until I said to him, “Kamal, let’s go, and reached for his elbow. He drew a deep breath. “Yes.” We drove back to Masoko in silence” (305). The publisher, Martin Kigoma who tells the tale of Kamal further narrates the tale of Omari whose compositions discuss the history of Tanzania and the German occupation. The multi-fold narration is evocative of the narrative technique adopted by Joseph Conrad in *Heart of Darkness* (1899). In the second part of *TMOS* Kamal is given his own narrative voice. The protagonist’s genesis is narrated like a fairy tale. Kamal realises that the desperate search for Saida and home has brought him to nothingness. Home is

elusive, and the lady of his dreams does not remain the same. The novel emphasises the incompleteness of 'return' which remains the most enigmatic. It is the amalgamation of the insider-outsider perspectives that endow the narratives of Vassanji with a flawless charm.

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