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Representation of Women in the East African Asian Community: a Study of M. G. Vassanji's novels – *No New Land* and *The Assassin's Song*

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Abstract

'A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction' (Woolf, 7) –

This famous cliché from Virginia Woolf's essay 'A Room of One's Own' asserts that women 'lack' power both financially and spatially, for which they are confined within the system of patriarchy. The very gender inequality, women's oppression and objectification in society have been represented through various feminist movements like first wave feminism, second wave feminism and third wave feminism during the 19th and 20th centuries. Postcolonial writers writing from the perspective of migration, identity crisis and homelessness never forget focus on the same issue of women's marginalized identities, their rights, and empowerment in society. M.G. Vassanji as a postcolonial writer depicts, in his novels, a delicate picture of the oppressed and depressed women in the male dominated Shamsi community of the 'Ismaili Khojas'. The paper aims to focus on two of Vassanji's novels, *No New Land* (1991) and *The Assassin's Song* (2007), depicting both the feminine inferiority in the male dominated society and their outcome as a dominant role as New Women in society. The reason behind the double focus is the writer's conscious endeavor to deconstruct the basic duality between the superior and the inferior, masculine and feminine, colonizer and colonized. The way Vassanji makes a correlation between postcolonialism and third wave feminism is also the focal point of the paper.

Keywords: representation, gender, feminism, patriarchy, new women, riot grrl, mimicry etc.

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Introduction

Moyez Gulamhussein Vassanji was born in Kenya, brought up in Tanzania and studied in the United States. This most undoubtedly replicates that Vassanji in his lifetime relished the favor of experiencing the predicaments and loopholes of migration and immigration into different places of different origin and culture. He made an imaginary framework of the life of the East African community by sweeping across Africa, Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania. This eventually motivated him to be creative in portraying the racial and colonial displacement and the de-territorialized identity of the alienation-struck East African Asian community.

Reading M. G. Vassanji, one may surely chalk out that Vassanji's motif behind handling the perspective of a community life is to depict the racial connotations and the aspect of identity politics. One may question whether the author's intention in writing novels was to represent the feminist aspect or not. Whatever the contradictions may be, it is an undeniable fact that without focusing on women, the representation of a community life may be impossible because of lack of contextual approach to texts.

'Representation', the word may be interpreted in terms of different forms- symbolic, metaphoric, metonymic etc. It can also be realized in terms of Derrida's concept of 'signifier', the word or the text and 'signified', the representation. Vassanji in his novels represents the social dilemma, colonial hypocrisy and prolonged alienation and oppression of the women in the Shamsi community through metonymic ideology, namely part for the whole. By upholding the calamities and predicaments meted out to a single community, he proposes a generalized view of the dire effects of Diaspora and applies them to people who are still in the process of migration and immigration.

As a postcolonial writer, Vassanji deals with the problems and predicaments of the descendants of the migrant community of the South Asian heritage that settled in East Africa, mainly in Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania. The problems include social and political victimization, gender discrimination, and cultural demarcation of the people including the women. These marginalized women faced the double jeopardy of getting subjected and tormented by both the European colonizers and the men folk of their traditional community. The domestic and sexual labor, unequal employment and family conflicts created a hegemonic pressure on them. However, as the time passes, these women, in their struggle and quest for identity, find out platform to express their voice and claim for liberation and emancipation from the hypocritical system of patriarchy and colonization. The immigrant women are now in pursuit of economic opportunities despite their state of severely being attacked and trapped by the oppressive male dominated society. In the foreign land, they get into contact with the affluent culture and try to

come out of the limitations of oppressive homeland. This results in a feeling of ambivalence and hyphenation between the old and the new experience, low and high culture, past and present.

With a nostalgic view of the past and original homeland, Vassanji himself gathered lived experiences of displacement, ambivalence and rootlessness because of his migration and immigration from one country to another. He also had the heartfelt experience of the traumatic situation in which the females in the Shamsi community had to spend their lives. He has so far authored seven novels in all: *The Gunny Sack* (1989), *No New Land* (1991), *The Book of Secrets* (1994), *Amriika* (1999), *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall* (2003), *The Assassin's Song* (2007) and *The Magic of Saida* (2012). In all the novels, he deals with "double diasporization" (Alexander, 215) of the Indian people to Africa and then to Canada and thus represents the mixed identity of the Indian, African and Canadian people. The doubly 'diasporized' women are the stark victims of oppression and dejection because of the very fact that their in-betweenness and liminality hinder and obstruct their outcome as 'New Women' (to be discussed later) with legitimate power and individuality. There always lurks a kind of dilemma in the double possibilities of the women's role as oppressed and their new role as dynamic and strong. This dilemma can best be represented and determined by sampling two of Vassanji's novels - *The Assassin's Song* and *No New Land*. In the first novel he has emphasized more on the traditional ideology of women as backward, submissive, subjugated and always caring and the second one reflects more on the women's emergence as something new, spontaneous, convincing and persuasive as if they have got to know how to come out of the limitations of patriarchy.

Gender and feminism

The subordination and submissiveness of women in society is prevalent everywhere in the world. This is because of the diehard system of patriarchy which constructs and provides meaning to the concept of gender. The idea that gender is socially constructed can be naturalized from the fact that people embody certain set-pattern gender norms and practices in order to conceptualize gender. Discrimination and exploitation of women have got legitimacy in a patriarchal society because of the fact that the so-called men folk have already determined that women are of weaker sex and they are mostly subordinate, tortured, exploited and oppressed. The duality between male and female, masculine and feminine, oppressor and oppressed occurs because of the repetitious performance of male and female in accordance with the social norms. Judith Butler, a famous feminist in her *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990) calls this performance as 'gender performativity' that reifies the dual categories and creates appearance of essential binary. The book is a significant milestone for constructing the explicit categories of sex, gender, sexuality and feminism.

To liberate and emancipate the women from the gender discrimination and inequality in society, feminism as a political movement came to gather momentum during the 1960s. That gender is not biologically determined but is determined by what we take it as is designed by the patriarchal norms in society is the prime motto of feminism. Virginia Woolf, a famous feminist, represents, through her book *A Room of One's Own* (1929) the perception that 'there is something wrong with the society's treatment of women'. Women 'lack' the power of expression because of the fact that 'a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction.' (Woolf, 7) During the 1970s, Simone de Beauvoir explored in her *The Second Sex* (1949) all aspects of socio-cultural feminist constructs and tried to deconstruct them all. Feminism took a different look with the rise of the 'girl power' which is a term of empowerment

and is exercised by girls, especially the self-reliant girls and women manifesting their ambition, assertion and individualism.

The term 'girl power' is much familiar with 'Riot Grrl' which provides a model of young girls persistently resisting the patriarchal identity. 'Riot Grrl' helps to create a community in which girls are able to speak about what is bothering them or write about what happened that day.' (Rosenberg and Garofalo, 1998:p809–42) These 'grrls' being flamboyantly dressed flaunt their identity as young women challenging the injustices to women through fanzine networks and vibrant songs. Independent and open-minded, they are so aggressive to break down the norms and conventions of society and defy the dominant and hegemonic culture. Moore (1988) terms the gangs as "institutionalization of the underclass in gangs in poor ethnic minority communities." According to Taylor (1993), 'women's independence means taking power and the territory and that means fighting over what is deemed important There were battles over boys and yet the focus was not primarily boyfriends but the issue of respect.'

'Riot Grrl' is one of the many expressions and concrete manifestations of Third Wave Feminism. However, Western feminism becomes increasingly interested in Postcolonial feminism which has its roots in the Second wave feminism that emerged in the early 1960s and extended through the late 1980s. This wave encouraged women to understand aspects of their personal lives, sexuality, reproductive rights, broadly critiquing patriarchy, capitalism, normative heterosexuality, and the woman's role as wife and mother. 'Theoretically, postcolonial feminism works to extend the analysis of the intersection of sexism and multicultural identity formation, to include the negative effects of western colonialism that still exist today.' (Schutte, 1998: p53–72) To deconstruct the very notion of duality between the masculine and feminine, strong and weak, superior and inferior, subject and object is the common outcry of third wave feminism which arose during the 1990s after the reign of first and second wave feminism. 'Third wave feminism, in particular, refutes dualistic thinking in general – thinking that divides the world into hierarchical dichotomies with one aspect regarded as superior and the 'other' regarded inferior, recognizing instead the existence of multiplicities.' (Mack-Canty, 2004) 'The body, one aspect of the 'natural sphere' is reanalyzed in the third wave feminism. Here the dichotomy between the Culture and Nature is re-weaved to represent the women's voice in the feminist wittings. Culture, the male voice plays the dominating role over Nature, the female voice, the most oppressed. 'Men were identified with disembodied characteristics such as order, freedom, light and reason, which were seen as better than, and in opposition to, women's allegedly more natural or embodied characteristics such as disorder, physical necessity, darkness and passion.' (Mack-Canty, 2004: p154-179) Chandra Talpade Mohanty, a famous Third Wave feminist views feminism as a 'mode of intervention' pointing out the struggle for women and the necessity of their negotiating the politics of identity. She also explains, "third world encompasses not only women living in 'underdeveloped' countries but also women of color living in privileged countries." Her urge is to make third world women, a western construct, a "monolithic misnomer and a subjugating category that again needs to be redeemed" (Mohanty, 334)

Oppressed women

The dichotomy in the contrasting and opposing role of women as subjugated and subjugating, traditional and modern, oppressed and dominant can best be represented if it is treated textually with proper lifelike instances. In *The Assassin's Song*, Vassanji portrays the alienation and displacement of the Gujarati people who welcome difficulties and predicaments in their lives the moment they unearth their past and old legacies. Here we get a complex realistic

picture of a tradition bound society of the Gujarati Muslim people. The women suffer from discrimination in the diehard patriarchal society where the age-old norms still construct their identity as caring mothers and subjugated wives.

Patriarchy is just a mechanical system where the conventional agents of male dominated society have the duty to press the button of patriarchal norms and the women are the mute monkeys to respond spontaneously to the button. According to Sylvia Walby patriarchy is “a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women” (Walby, 1990). Most of the women characters in *The Assassin's Song* play the role of suppressed mothers and wives who shed tears of anguish in the darkest corners of society. The women, as is narrated by the novelist have been treated as child giving machines without any flesh and blood identity. Through the myth of Rupade Rani, the goddess, Vassanji has tried to envision the crucial condition of the women who fail to give birth to a child for a long period of time. Their social value is measured by their mechanical child birth. The Lord, a Rajput, denies accepting the Sufi, Nur Fazal as the husband of his daughter. Rather he warns: ‘if in twelve months she has not produced a child, you will not be welcome in this land and your home will be forfeit. Your followers will be outlawed and your name will be anathema.’ (TAS, 140)

Himani Banerjee in her prose poem “Doing Time” (1987) upholds the cruel enslavement of the frustrated and anguished women who do not relish the joy of freedom: “If we, who are not white, and also women, have not yet seen that here we live in a prison, that we are doing time, then we are fools...” In Vassanji's novels, men have occupied the prior position in everything in society. In *The Assassin's Song*, Karsan goes to meet Mansoor, the Gujarati man in Chandni Chawk and a middle aged woman (about thirty) on her sudden encounter with him ‘immediately covers her head upon sighting him (me).’ (75) Karsan's mother is a victim of patriarchal system of society as she every time remains sad and depressed because of her simultaneous family battle with her husband. She knew it very well that ‘first and foremost I (Karsan) was his (my) father's son and successor.’ (190) She is frequently found to be chided outrageously by her husband and she ‘broke down into huge sobs and beat her chest a few times, so that it bruised and turned a deep red.’ (TAS, 145) After the girl is married and enters the trap of the husband's family, she is no more welcomed and loved by her own family, rather, she is pushed into a life she would never have dreamed of or desired. Vassanji generalizes this situation - ‘what Indian woman in those times returned home from her husband's to be welcomed and loved? Sisters-in-law lurked like sharks in those risky waters; the poor victim set foot inside at her own peril.’ (TAS, 338)

The wretched women are merely utilized as the objects for appeasing sexual hunger of the men. Rupade Rani, the virgin mother of Pirbaag, who ‘for so long was deprived the bliss of the conjugal bed’ (TAS, 365) cures the secret sexual diseases of the women for which they suffer in the dark corners of their house. “Such is the lot of women”. “They are hostage to their husband's love” (TAS, 138). To the men, the women are mere parasites who only depend upon their economy and will power. Nur Fazal can be treated as an agent of patriarchy as he has married several times in his long life and created many prominent descendants including Jaffar Shah, Balak Shah etc. When Karsan's mother was sick ‘how easily she was given away by her family, like a reject...’ (TAS, 338) This shows that a girl once married loses recognition and admiration from her maternal family as if they seem to feel released from her burden. By way of reflecting upon the issue of women's subjugation and dominance, Vassanji thus makes a link between Postcolonialism and the Third Wave Feminism because both focus on the

deconstruction of the basic duality between the empowered and the powerless, light and dark, the colonizer and the colonized.

The new women

We have already talked about the emergence of 'Riot Grrls' who resemble the 'intelligent, mature and affectionate 'New Women'. The birth of the new women replaces the Victorian concept of domesticity and the oppressive patriarchal culture. The Victorian period saw the women lacking independent means of subsistence. They were forcefully indoctrinated to accept their low status and constricted lives. During the end of the 19th century, the new women were born to adopt the liberated status in their behavior, manner, outlook and demeanor. There occurred some revolutions seeking political rights for the middle class and working class citizens. Gail Finney calls her a 'new woman' who "typically values self fulfillment and independence rather than the stereotypically feminine ideal of self sacrifice; believes in legal and sexual equality; often remains single because of the difficulty of combining such equality with marriage; is more open about her sexuality than the 'Old Man'; is well educated and reads a great deal; has a job; is athletic or otherwise physical, vigorous and accordingly, prefers comfortable clothes (sometimes male attire) to traditional female garb." Henrik Ibsen through his famous play *A Doll's House* advocates feminism by supporting freedom and emancipation of the women from the exclusively male society. Here Nora, the protagonist, is an emblematic figure to represent the pursuit of selfhood. Thus, through autonomy and individual discontent with conventional gender norms, these new women challenge the male construct in society to be equal with them in areas of business and profession. They tended to court 'modern choices', present themselves frequently in the public spheres, and venture into different jobs outside their domestic arena. Among these women there were athletes, glamorous performers, and working girls, who were engaged to empower themselves and extend the parameters of women's space.

'A wife must always be a few feet behind her husband' (Despande, 1990: p124) – this traditional die-hard thinking has been drastically replaced by the idea of the new women's outcome as strong, confident, moral and fearless. Not only in the foreign country but also in more flourishing parts of India, women and girls are found to break the orthodox gender stereotypes and traditional Indian lifestyle. They have in their hands respectable careers and are found across different sorts of popular culture like acting in TV serials, modeling and advertisements. Passing through torturous physical, mental and emotional agony the women have got their entire personality changed into a whole new being. To live an active and dynamic life, they aim at achieving everything with their strong energy, self esteem, self confidence, and initiative style. "In her relationship with men she can adopt cold emotional strategies. She can prefer career to love – she can make a distinction between love and sex. She can be powerful and dominating."(Hochschild, 2003)

In *No New Land*, the women have got proper footing as they have come out of the restraint of patriarchal domination with marked majesty and eminence. They have learnt to have strength in voice to protest any sort of ignominy caused by patriarchal system – "I am not a shameless woman and those were not naked women," said the cashier at the top of her voice...'(NNL57) The girls are not at all regressive in their behavior and power of language. Their multilingual capacity is reflected in the line –'she spoke French, Dutch, and English, and a little very accented Gujarati.'(NNL, 147)The time has come when they are found to criticize the gender discrimination and the traditional strictures of family. After her husband dies, Sushila refuses to get enslaved by the household duties and saves her daughters from the patriarchal

treachery – “I was not going to slave for my fat mother-in-law and the fat aunts and grandmother. And I would not choose that life for my daughter either.”(NNL, 154)

Thus, in the women section of the East African Asian community, ‘there was a freedom in (her), wholeness and a self-sufficiency.’(NNL, 173) Imbued with the high culture, the girls are no longer in their father’s shadow. There is drastic change in their dressing pattern, style and language. Whereas the father thinks that their ‘hips should be covered with a shirt or kurta’(NNL, 188), the girls do not find any substance in that. The author’s basic duality between his depiction of oppressed women and the new challenging women is best reflected in *The Assassin’s Song* through the representation of Shilpa and Ma, Karsan’s sister and mother respectively. While the mother was ‘simple and caring, plump and motherly, Shilpa was the glamorous city girl, the voluptuous torment...’ (TAS, 107)

For these glamorous girls, getting secure job with ease and demand is not more difficult at all – ‘the women are always in demand, as typists and clerks, even babysitters, changing jobs with ease, confidently picking up the new ways, never looking back from their new freedom.’(NNL, 44) Nurdin, the jobless migrant loses his masculine pre-eminence in the household as Zera, his wife is the sole breadwinner. “Unlike in Dar es Saalam, the immigrant Indian women in Canada stand a better chance than men in finding stable employment, which topples the gender system to which Nurdin has become accustomed” (Ojwang, 2011:p68-87). He even desires to get out of the obligations of fatherhood and marriage. Being falsely accused of having sexual assault against a European migrant woman, Lalani faced his near social death. He feels guilty for his wrong-doing and bestial traits like cruelty, promiscuity and godlessness and this accumulates to his tragic situation. Vassanji in one of his interviews confesses: “In *No New Land* the point is not only whether Nurdin touched the woman inappropriately or not, it is also what was in his mind, and the fact that he was torn between duty to his wife and children and where he came from, the community establishment that he was a part of, and a real possibility for personal liberation.”(Bower et al, 2011)

‘Although gender (and race) is socially constructed, it is not fixed but historical, and since it is constantly negotiated within societies and cultures, it is fluid and changing.’ (Jayaram, 2011). With self-expression, the women’s identity has become a fluid search in order to be fulfilled. The immigrant women do not find anything dynamic in their native style of living and therefore they start imitating the male culture and foreign lifestyle. Bharati Mukherjee in her novels like *Wife* (1976), *Jasmine* (1989) etc., portrays the immigrant women’s attempts to assimilate themselves to find a place in the mainstream of the life of the adopted land, abandoning the former life style of their country. In *No New Land*, the women, especially the young girls, shake off the lifestyle of their native land and adopt the delicate and elevated culture in the foreign land. They attempt to express their ‘foreignness’ through their ‘partial presence’ (Bhabha 88) by imitating the Canadian dressing pattern and try to escape from their sense of native inferiority. According to Bhabha (1994), the influence of multiple cultures brings in their mind ‘a kind of tension between their identity stasis and the demand for its change and mimicry makes a compromise to the tension’. Ashcroft (2002) claims, “Mimicry of the center is the periphery to immerse themselves in the imported culture, denying their origins in attempt to become more English than the English”. (4) The beautiful quality of the Canadian clothes reflects better lifestyle and the immigrant women being tempted by the possibility of rebirth through the imitation of foreign clothing decide to leave Dar. They target the new Canadians with ‘tall ladies in fur, men in tweeds and leather’ (NNL, 52).

Franz Fanon in his book, *Black Skins, White Mask* (1952) terms this type of complex as “epidermal schema.” In the ‘little Paki shitty-stan’ (NNL, 167), Fatima sternly denies her upbringing and family and wears fashionable dresses. Nanji was ‘under the impression that her wearing dresses now and more fashionable clothes meant she no longer thought much of him.’ (NNL, 168) Like Jemubhai in *Inheritance of Loss* (2006) who was ashamed of his epidermal difference from the white men and lost his self respect failing to conceal his skin beneath white powder, Roshan in *No New Land* also endeavors to hide her darker complexions. She uses huge make up and creams and straightens her wavy hair. She wears ‘garish clothes’ ‘perhaps to deflect attention from her face.’ (NNL, 37) She was ashamed being conscious of her identity- ‘she had been their father’s child by a previous mother, rarely mentioned but a black woman, as everyone guessed.’ (NNL, 37) In fact, ‘one of the major hurdles that East African Asians were to face was the notion of Africanness being equated with blackness and opposed to whiteness. Being African was not being white, in which case brown Africans were forced into a shady, borderline zone from which they had to contend with establishing their cultural credentials, by both distancing themselves from the African laborer and by not identifying too closely with the white ruling elite, as they were themselves colonized peoples’ (Hand, 2011: p100-116).

Concluding remarks

Despite their ceaseless struggle against patriarchal ideology, the women are ultimately left with humiliation and disintegration of identity. In their way of imitating the culture of the foreign land, they become mere mimicry and ironical followers of the colonizers without any self subsistence at all. They get helpless in the artificial, isolationist Western culture with their common outcry:

“What kind of place you’ve brought me to, Son?
Where the windows are always closed
And the front door it is always locked?”(Parameswaran, 1992)

In fact, the dying possibilities of women’s attempts to get assimilated with the affluent culture of the privileged class result into their ultimate frustration, alienation, boredom and nostalgia for the past. In their way of imitation and mimicry of the male counterparts, they most possibly fall into the same pattern of the so-called patriarchal values and get mocked at and caricatured by themselves. In the Indian scenario, for instance, the women despite being empowered by the ensuing opportunities of employment and economy are still bereft of the possible and legitimate access to knowledge and information. There is a lot to be done in order to rectify and change the patriarchal Indian family, deft the imposition of ‘parda’ system, broaden the domestic space, and deconstruct the traditional concept of ‘Indian home’ and ‘good girl’. It is a fact undeniable that the economic opportunities and the educational attainments should enable women to capture and exercise their “reasoned agency.” (Sen, 1999: iii) But, in their utmost endeavor to uproot the patriarchal values from the society, they cannot help but ultimately accept the household and maternal legacies. The reason lies in the fact that too much of solidarity and homogenization in the community life often misleads the people to create a sort of hegemonic culture in order to ‘silence the marginalized and the dispossessed.’ (Dasgupta, 297)

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