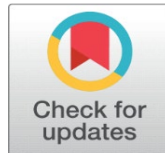


THEMES OF DISPLACEMENT AND IDENTITY OF VIKRAM LALL IN M.G. VASSANJI'S NOVEL THE IN-BETWEEN WORLD OF VIKRAM LALL

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ABSTRACT

The issue of migration, displacement or dislocation is not new. From the beginning man has been moving across the globe in search of a job or for safety reasons. The In-Between World of Vikram Lall by M.G. Vassanji examines the difficulties of displacement and identity in the post-colonial Kenyan setting, where diasporic peoples' lives are shaped by historical, political, and cultural factors. Vikram Lall, the protagonist is the man divided between several identities and commitments. The journey of Vikram Lall, which reflects the larger story of South Asian immigrants in East Africa is examined in this novel. The story expertly combines themes of identity negotiation in the face of changing socio-political environments, displacement and belonging.

In his novel The In-Between World of Vikram Lall Vassanji uses the idea of migration both psychological and physical to emphasize the conflict and confusion that diasporic people go through. The protagonist Vikram battles to settle his mixed identity arose between his colonial Kenyan childhood, his Indian ancestry, and his ultimate banishment to Canada. His journey is placed within the larger framework of Kenyan history and the effects of colonialism, which highlights how the personal and political intertwine to shape diasporic identities in the novel.

Keywords: Identity, Diaspora, Home, Migration, Multicultural Identity

1. INTRODUCTION

M.G. Vassanji is an eminent Canadian author of Indian descent, born on May 30, 1950, in Nairobi, Kenya. He grew up in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, and his diverse background significantly influences his writing. Vassanji belongs to the Ismaili Muslim community, a heritage that is often reflected in his work. Vassanji moved to the United States for studies. He earned a Bachelor's Degree in Physics from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and a Ph.D. in Nuclear Physics from the University of Pennsylvania. He later relocated to Canada, where he shifted his focus from science to literature. He became an essential figure in the Canadian literary scene, co-founding the literary magazine 'The Toronto South Asian Review'.

Vassanji's writings frequently explore themes of diaspora, identity, memory, and the legacies of colonialism, often set against the backdrop of East African history. He is best known for his first novel, *The Gunny Sack* (1989), and *The Book of Secrets* (1994), which won him his first Giller Prize. He won the Giller Prize again for *The In-Between World of Vikram*

Lall (2003), making him the first author to win the award twice. His other notable works include *No New Land* (1991), *Amriika* (1999), *The Assassin's Song* (2007), and *Nairobi Heat* (2011). Vassanji has also written memoirs and essays that explore identity and belonging. Vassanji's writing style is known for its rich narrative, combination history with fiction and reflecting the complexities of multicultural experiences. His contribution to literature has earned him numerous accolades, cementing his reputation as one of Canada's leading writers.

2. DISPLACEMENT AND MIGRATION

When there is migration due to whatsoever reason, it cuts off the people from their roots though partially in the beginning. It involves a break from known locations, customs, and lifestyles, which can result in feelings of loss, alienation, and an ongoing quest for a sense of belonging. Moving physically is only one aspect of displacement; it also includes the emotional and psychological turmoil that comes with uprooting oneself, losing one's connection to one's past, and being thrown into unfamiliar, unfriendly, or indifferent surroundings.

The word 'displacement' has numerous connotations and applications in a variety of social, cultural, psychological, and geographic situations. Basically, displacement is the act of evicting people or groups from their natural or established surroundings, whether via force or voluntary. "movement of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters."

In the past, political unrest, economic exploitation, colonization, and conflict have all consistently resulted in displacement. The process of colonization played a crucial role in causing displacement, as imperial powers altered social structures, shifted populations, and utilized resources for financial benefit. Indigenous populations were frequently uprooted from their native lands and cultures, which frequently resulted in the loss of their identities and customs. For instance, communities were relocated or uprooted during British colonial authority in Africa and Asia to fulfill the demands of the colonial economy, such as for labor on plantations, building railroads, or serving in the armed forces.

Migration is another form of displacement that has both voluntary and forced dimensions. Economic migration, driven by the pursuit of better opportunities, often results in individuals and families leaving their homeland in search of a better life. However, even voluntary migration often leads to feelings of displacement as migrants struggle to integrate into new cultural environments, where their identities are marginalized or others. Forced migration, including refugees fleeing conflict, political persecution, or natural disasters, is a particularly devastating form of displacement. Refugees are uprooted from their homes, often carrying traumatic memories of violence, and face the challenge of rebuilding their lives in foreign lands.

3. VIKRAM'S JOURNEY OF DISPLACEMENT

Cultural loss and identity crises are common experiences in the context of displacement. People who have been uprooted usually struggle to balance the demands of their new society's assimilation requirements with their previous cultural identity. The ensuing condition is frequently one of liminality, or being in-between identities and not entirely belonging to either the host society's culture or the culture that was left behind. Even if the person is physically settled, this cultural 'in-betweenness' can cause alienation, loneliness, and a feeling of continuous exile.

In his novel *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall* Vassanji stated that the straddling cultures and places, "have oscillated between different loyalties. Thus the eight-year-old child Vikram intriguingly finds that he is bestowed with conflicting role models that stand at the two poles. On one end stands his "proudly Kenyan, hopelessly... colonial" (*In-Between World of Vikram Lall*, 21). Displacement can take on more ethereal aspects, such as psychic and emotional dislocation, in addition to physical travel. Changes in identity, affiliation, or self-perception brought on by internal conflicts or external pressures can result in psychological displacement. In the same way and similar situations, Vikram Lall feels being cut off from where he had come and suffers a fractured identity. Contradictions between the past and the present, as well as between conflicting cultural or social standards, are frequently the source of his fragmentation.

Vassanji delves into the internal displacement throughout the novel *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall*

It brings a tense environment in the characters who try to fit in with their new surroundings while maintaining a connection to one's cultural background; this tension frequently takes the form of identity crises. For many whom experience displacement, being between worlds or stuck between tradition and modernity, home and host cultures, is a defining experience. Characters that struggle with the feeling of not quite being here nor there, representing the nuanced emotional realities of displacement, commonly depict this in literature.

The effects of relocation on identity are significant. People who are displaced are forced to consider their identity and sense of place. A rethinking of identity may result from these inquiries as people try to incorporate various cultural influences into a cohesive sense of who they are. But the process is frequently tough, which can result in emotions of loneliness, loss, and inadequacy. Children of displaced individuals may inherit these challenges even if they have never personally experienced physical displacement, demonstrating how this internal conflict can last throughout generations. Vikram Lall frequently faces the trauma of displacement. He investigates it in post-colonial situations via the prism of cultural hybridity and the legacy of colonialism. Numerous towns and nations are currently experiencing political, cultural, and geographic upheaval as a result of their colonial past. The paradoxes and legacies of a colonial past frequently shape the identities of post-colonial cultures, resulting in what some academics refer to as hybrid identities. Native customs and colonial influences are blended to create these hybrid identities, which give rise to a feeling of being torn between opposing cultural forces.

Through his writing on post-colonialism literature Vassanji examines the experiences of people who are neither totally aligned with their local traditions nor entirely integrated into the dominant culture imposed by colonialism, provides a good illustration of this type of displacement. These individuals live in a society characterized by cultural ambiguity and fragmentation, where they must negotiate their identities. Displacement is a state that persists beyond time and space, as evidenced by the continuous effort to define oneself in connection to colonial past and post-colonial present.

4. VIKRAM LOOKING FOR IDENTITY

The experience of Vikram Lall, an Indian-born Kenyan whose identity is formed by several layers of displacement, is at the center of the book. During British colonial authority, his family, like many others of South Asian descent, immigrated to East Africa. In Kenya's social order, Indians hold a rather ambiguous status because they are not entirely embraced by their local Africans nor completely supportive of the British colonists. Malak rightly pointed out that, "With their multiple migrations and displacements, these East African Asians develop a "multiplicity of affiliations" (Malak, 277). The core of Vikram's identity is this feeling of in-betweenness. He has a disjointed sense of self as he grows up, feeling like he belongs anywhere and nowhere. His assimilation into both African and British cultures, as well as the customs of his Indian background, causes his cultural identity to fluctuate periodically.

The historical background of post-colonial Kenya, where many ethnic minorities are struggling with their identities in the wake of independence, is also reflected in the story. Vikram experiences a personal crisis during this time since he feels more and more cut off from the larger Indian community as well as his African childhood pals. His sense of displacement is not alleviated by the end of colonial control; rather, it is made worse by new political processes that drive him even farther apart.

The In-Between World of Vikram Lall also has the crucial element of the topic of political displacement. Kenya's political climate is becoming more unstable as the nation gains independence. The corruption and power struggles of the new regime replace the idealism of the anti-colonial movement. After first attempting to avoid politics, Vikram finds himself further entangled in a web of dishonesty and corruption. His position as a go-between, arranging shady agreements for the political class, perfectly captures his position as an outsider who is neither entirely a part of the new Kenyan leadership nor innocent of its deeds.

The novel's investigation of moral ambiguity is connected to this political relocation as well. Instead of being motivated by money, Vikram's involvement in unethical activities is a result of a complicated mix of fear, survival instincts, and loyalty. He is left morally adrift and reluctantly participates in a system. This moral dislocation highlights the idea that relocation in the novel is about a deeper separation from one's values and sense of self, rather than only about geographical location. It also echoes his cultural and emotional displacement.

Another important element of the book is cultural displacement, particularly in relation to the experience of immigrants. The Indian community in Kenya, including Vikram's family, is shown as being in a constant state of transition. While attempting to adjust to the reality of life in Africa, they cling to the traditions and practices of their ancestral homeland. They are unable to completely return to an authentic Indian identity, nor can they fully integrate into Kenyan society, leading to a sense of cultural stasis.

Vikram's family's generational split serves as a stark reminder of this cultural exile. Vikram and his sister Deepa are more willing to interact with the growing Kenyan identity and make ties with Africans than their parents, who are still deeply rooted in their Indian heritage. But opposition to these integration efforts comes from both inside their community and from society at large. "You were in with the whites so you had power over us. And you were so alien, more so than the whites... You are so inscrutable, you Indians." To this Vikram substantiates, "To the Africans I would always be the Asian,

the Shylock, I would never escape that suspicion, that stigma..."(p.286) This conflict is exemplified by Deepa's friendship with her African companion Njoroge, which is ultimately impeded by racial and cultural biases. The failed romance represents the impossibility of completely overcoming the barriers imposed by cultural exile.

Vikram who spends his final years thinking back on the past, takes his exile in Canada as self-imposed. This psychological displacement is evident. His banishment serves as a concrete and symbolic illustration of his position of flux a man unable to fully identify with either his past or his present. This sensation of dislocation is furthered by the novel's structure, which switches back and forth between Vikram's memories and the story told in the present. The seamless transition between many eras and locales mirrors Vikram's disjointed sense of self. Recalling turns becomes an effort to construct a cohesive identity, but it's ultimately a pointless endeavor. The present presents no obvious way out of the past, which is still shattered and tainted by treachery and sorrow.

5. CONCLUSION

The In-Between World of Vikram Lall by M.G. Vassanji is a comprehensive examination of the different types of displacement physical, cultural, political, and psychological that characterizes the experience of being an immigrant. The novel presents a complex picture of what it means to live in the liminal spaces between two worlds through Vikram's journey. In the novel, displacement is portrayed as an intrinsic condition of living in a society where boundaries are continually shifting and identities are flexible, rather than just as a result of migration or historical events. Beyond the specific narrative of Vikram Lall, the novel's portrayal of dislocation speaks to the universal human experience of yearning for acceptance in a society that frequently rejects hybridity. In this way, *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall* is a meditation on the universal struggle to find one's place in a divided and excluded world rather than merely the story of a single person.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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None.

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