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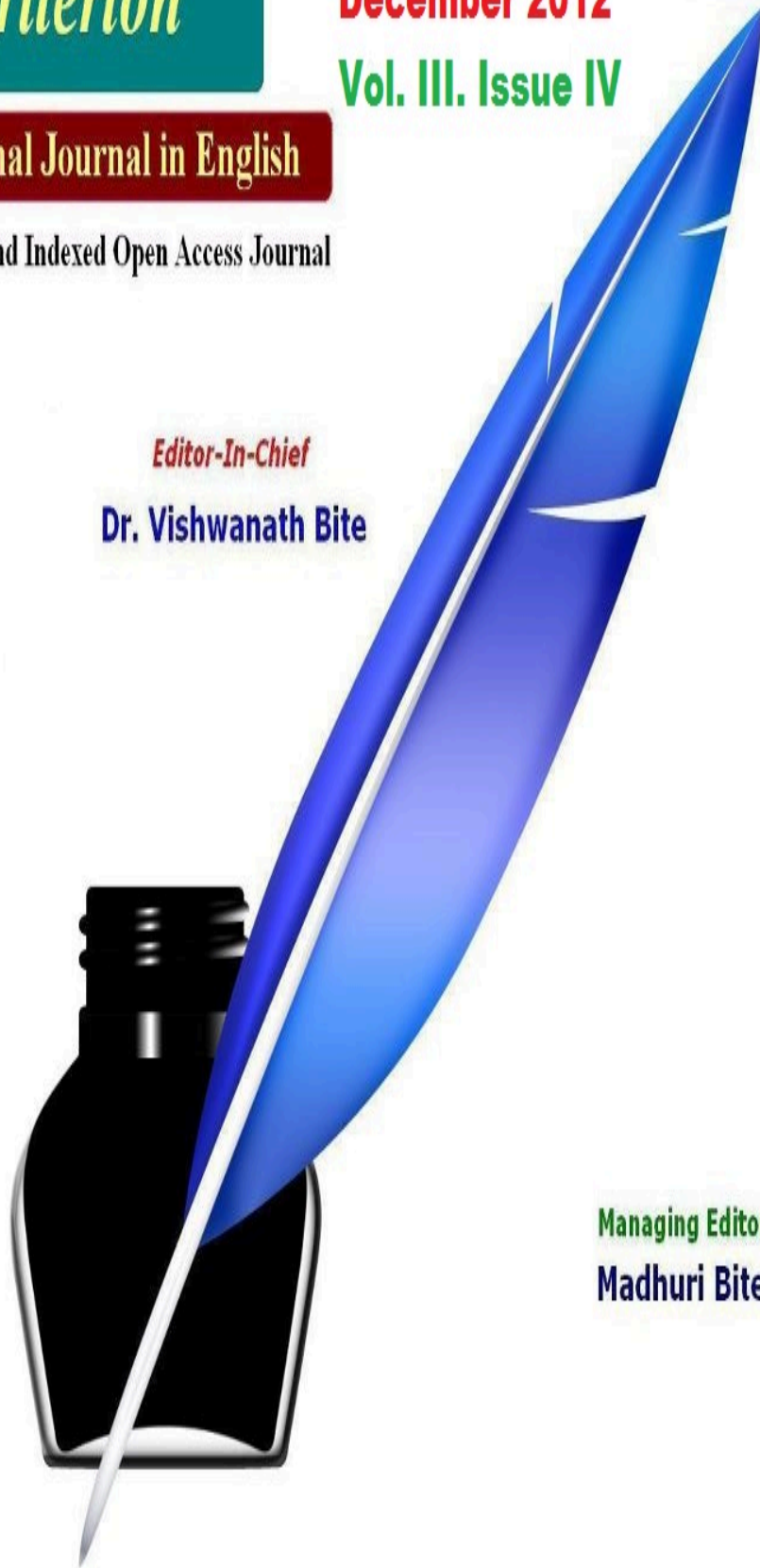
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[www.the-criterion.com](http://www.the-criterion.com)

[criterionejournal@gmail.com](mailto:criterionejournal@gmail.com)

## **A Poignant Portrait of Human Displacement**

**G. Surya**

Assistant Professor,  
Department of English,  
S. F. R. College for Women, Sivakasi.  
Virudhunagar District,  
Tamilnadu.

### **Introduction**

The twenty first century need not welcome future immigrants with open arms for it will be reconditioned by not just the population explosion, but also by the pyrotechnics of cyber technology. The set of power equations and policy paradigms that has served the twentieth century will be soon outdated. People have tasted some of it in the violence that tore apart many countries and nations, described in sanitized language as “ethnic cleansing”. Perhaps, we will have to understand the whole history of immigration beginning with nomadic man. They have moved in tribes; the tribe had territory to defend and this was the nation. Over centuries socio-political upheavals among tribes as they moved from place to place became a threat to the fabric of the construction of nationality. Immigration and nationalism have thus come to acquire a complexity that cannot be understood in its entirety. Due to political turmoil and prejudice, many Indians residing in East African nations, such as Uganda, Kenya, and Tanzania, left the region for Canada and other Western countries.

Canada is a land of immigrants. It has been attracting people from all over the world with varied socio-ethnic background. Immigrant as defined in the census “refers to people who are or have been at one time, landed immigrants in Canada. A landed immigrant is a person who has been granted the right to live in Canada permanently by immigration authorities”.

The early twentieth century saw a heavy influx of immigrants to Britain. In the 1970s, Canada and the U.S. opened their doors more widely to immigrants from the developing regions, and these countries replaced Britain as the destination of English- speaking immigrants. Canada (Toronto in Particular) became the refuge of the immigrants, mainly due to the liberalized Canadian immigrant laws and the increasingly hostile atmosphere in economically declining Britain (London in Particular). There is hardly a country in the world whose people did not come to make Canada their permanent home. The South Asian Canadian community, like all other Canadian communities, is born of immigration from different parts of South Asia.

The term “South Asian” refers to individuals from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, as well as to those from Africa, Mauritius, Fiji, and the Caribbean, Guyana, Great Britain, and European countries who trace their origins to the Indian subcontinent. The term “South Asian” is a socially constructed term in Canada; it is a generic label applied to this very diverse group. The individual immigrants from the countries that constitute South Asia do not consider themselves part of the subcontinent; rather, they identify themselves as former residents of separate socio – political entities. There is considerable competition among India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka for power and influence in the region. There is great diversity among the people of these countries in terms of their language, religion, and other cultural traits. On the surface, it seems almost impossible to find common characteristics and shared experiences

among “South Asians” in Canada, but a common region of origin and common historical experience make it possible to consider South Asians as a group.

In Canada, South Asians also belong to the socially constructed categories of “immigrants”, a term that is frequently used to refer to people who are foreign – looking or non – white. Many South Asians are now second generation and consider themselves Canadian or, as hyphenated South Asian – Canadians. Not all South Asians now living in Canada came directly from countries of South Asia; many came from India via Africa or the Caribbean, where their ancestors had settled in the British colonies either in the 19<sup>th</sup> century or the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Thus the term “South Asian” does not represent a homogeneous entity. In spite of such a variety, this umbrella term has produced a unitary community that is not actually there and thereof a South Asian Canadian identity has emerged.

South Asian Canadian literature occupies a place of prominence among the various immigrant literatures. A new cartography of the Canadian literature became necessary when the immigrant writers began to chart out unmapped territories in the annals of Canadian literary history. Among all the immigrants in Canada, the South Asians have been more active in the literary field than any other single group. This has led to the genesis of a distinct genre called ‘South Asian Canadian Writing’. Just as the term ‘South Asian’ is inclusive of a wide range of people of different nationalities, the term ‘South Asian Canadian Literature’ incorporates the distinctness of the divergent groups that go into the making of this genre. South Asians have contributed enormously to the literary and artistic scene in Canada. It would be impossible to enumerate all the excellent South Asian Canadian writers and artists in this limited space. A good number of award winning authors such as Rohinton Mistry, M.G.Vassanji, and Michael Ondaatje have added immeasurably to Canadian Literature. M.G.Vassanji has become a distinct figure in the canon of South Asian Canadian literature.

### **Vassanji’s Life and Career**

Moyez Gullamhussein Vassanji was born in Nairobi, Kenya in 1950 and raised in Tanzania. His family was part of a community of Indians who had immigrated to Africa. When he was 19, Vassanji left the University of Nairobi on a scholarship to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He studied nuclear physics which he later earned a Ph.D. at the University of Pennsylvania. From there he immigrated to Canada, working at the Chalk River atomic power station. In 1980 Vassanji moved to Toronto and began writing his first novel, *The Gunny Sack*, which was published in 1989. That year he, with his wife Nurjehan Aziz, founded and edited the first issue of *The Toronto South Asian Review (TSAR)*. After the publication of *The Gunny Sack* Vassanji began writing full time and consequently ended his career in physics.

Vassanji is the author of six novels and two collections of short stories. His work has appeared in various countries and several languages. Vassanji’s works represent the convergence of cultures that characterizes both East Africa and North America. The particular history of immigrant communities once or twice removed from South Asia inspires his portrayal of conflicted relationships between individual and the communities to which they belong. These communities, although always central to characters’ identities, are also provisional and mutable. Vassanji makes this point in his fictional work by chronicling a group over time, unraveling its obscured bloodlines and exposing the secret choices of its members.

Vassanji’s first and most well-known novel, *The Gunny Sack* (1980) was published in 1989. The novel won the Commonwealth Writers Prize, and established Vassanji as an important

voice in the emerging field of immigrant / minority writers. In *The Gunny Sack*, Vassanji tells the story of four generations of Asians in Tanzania. He examines the themes of identity, displacement and race relations. He also tries to preserve and recreate oral histories and mythologies that have long been silenced.

Vassanji's second novel *No New Land* (1991) is set in Toronto, and portrays a group of Indians from Tanzania trying to adapt to life in a new land. Humorous and tragic all at once, the novel illustrates how the past always haunts the present and the future. In 1992, Vassanji published *Uhuru Street*, a collection of loosely linked short stories that all take place along the same street in Dar es Salaam. Many characters from *The Gunny Sack* reappear in the short stories.

*The Book of Secrets* (1994), featuring a minor character from a story in *Uhuru street*, won Vassanji the First Giller Prize that same year. In *The Book of Secrets*, Vassanji traces the histories of people who possessed the diary of a British administrator, the book of secrets.

The theme of immigration is re-examined again in *Amrika* (1999), Vassanji's next novel. It is the story of a young student who comes to America from Dar es Salaam, and his subsequent life in North America. In November 2003 M.G.Vassanji won a Second Giller Prize for his novel, *The In-Between Life of Vikram Lall*. Here Vikram tells us about his own evolution in a world of bribery and corruption that spans 47 years of history in Kenya.

In 2005 Vassanji was made a Member of the order of Canada. He has also won the Bressani Literature Prize, and the Harbourfront Festival Prize. He published a second collection of short fiction in 2005, titled *When She Was Queen*. The stories are set in Asia, Africa and North America and their characters likewise move from place to place.

In 2007 he published *The Assassin's Song* about a Canadian professor who inherits an ancient family responsibility that forces him to confront his familial history in the Indian Village of Haripur. The novel was short listed for the 2007 Giller Prize. Vassanji also works in other genres. He published *A Place Within: Rediscovering India* in 2008. In 2009, he published a biography of *Mordecai Richler*. Presently he is working on a collection of short stories that reveal immigrant life in Toronto, Canada.

This article entitled *A Rich Portrait of a Transplanted Community: A Study of M.G.Vassanji's No New Land* deals with a poignant portrait of human displacement, the disenchantment of immigrants and their compromise with the nation they emigrate.

### **A Poignant Portrait of Human Displacement**

“*No New Land*, with quiet humor and wisdom,  
gives deep insight into the strain and promises of immigration”.

- World Literature Today.

M.G.Vassanji's second novel *No New Land* (1991) traces the immigration of an Asian family from Tanzania to Don Mills, a Toronto suburb where the immigrant Ismaili community has settled, having been exiled from East-Africa due to the racial politics there. The problem is that the new immigrants are regarded as “visible”, which increases their difficulty of settling among people of different color, manners and conventions. Though they are permitted to cross the political borders of the nations, they are not accommodated inside the borders of the minds of the natives. They are always made conscious of the fact that their homes exist elsewhere, across the borders. The protagonist Nurdin Lalani becomes the embodiment of the entire trauma

that characterizes an immigrant psyche. This chapter is to discuss how the novelist, portraying different incidents caused by racial discrimination, explores through the characters the psyche of rootless, frightened and insecure minority immigrants who are pitted against a hypocrite fanatic majority.

Nurdin is the second / middle son of Hazi Lalani who had immigrated to Tanganayika as a young man of sixteen in 1906, a time when the German government was recruiting Britain's Indian subjects to help build the German Empire to Africa. The family of the protagonist Nurdin Lalani is a double immigrant family Asia to Africa to Canada. Nurdin's family living in Dar, Africa, with their two children. They settle on a decision to immigrate to Canada. They hope to find their new opportunities, start a new life and make a decent living. Consequently, they come to Toronto suburb of Don Mill where they make their home. The Indian community in Canada is clearly visible and extensive so the new comers do not find themselves utterly alien; however most of the things they experience are new to them. The main male character Nurdin confronted with a number of embarrassing and uncomfortable situations, in which he does not necessarily know how to behave. He notices that despite his considerable work experience, it is not an easy task for an alien in Canada to find any good job. The whole family has to face and tackle with many a difficult, complicated problem. However, what they discover is the fact that the values which used to constitute an integral, substantial part in their life in Africa pursue them in Canada as well. These values seem to exert a great influence on their present life, not to mention the fact that they do not match many Canadian circumstances and standards.

During the introductory chapters the readers discover the actual cases for abandoning the life of people in Africa and heading for the new land. These reasons seem to mainly political as the narrator says:

General Idi Amin, who had overthrown an elected government, had a dream. In this dream, Allah told him that the Asians, exploiters who did not want to integrate with the Africans had to go (25).

As there were a considerable number of the Indians making their living in Africa many of them chose different destinations, however, the most common ones were Canada and the United States. As the author comments: "Canada was open and, for the rich, America too" (25). When Nurdin's family finally arrives in Canada they encounter many complex problems connected with adjusting to the new culture and the new life style. They become dissatisfied with their life and feel as if trapped between the two worlds, the old one which is their former life and the new one which is Canada where they cannot really adjust and find themselves. Yet they make a valiant struggle on the new land surviving animosity and indifference.

There is no new land,  
My friend, no  
new sea; for the city will follow you,  
In the same streets you'll wander endlessly....(76)

The novel opens with two depressing events in the life of Lalani's family: Nurdin's daughter Fatima gets admission in Arts and Science College instead of pharmacy, the prestigious one, and Nurdin is accused of raping a white girl. The later incident becomes central to the novel. Fatima ultimately accepts her plight and decides that "Arts and Science was not so bad after all" (207). But Nurdin has to face many problems both in and out of the family.

Nurdin feels defeated and dejected as he is accused of rape. When he informs about the charge of rape on him his son asks, "Did you?"(8) and his wife echoes the same question. The white lady Crs. Broadbent, in the Cafeteria refuses to serve him lunch, she declares in a hostile



tone, “I am not going to serve this rapist”(179) then announces, “ where he comes from, both his hands would be chopped off ”(180). Although he is innocent, he questions the purity of his own thoughts and even tries to find the guilt in his behavior. Finally, the girl who had accused him drops her charges against him after great persuasion from Jamal the lawyer, one of his immigrant friends.

Even in African city Dar they had to face fierce racial discrimination. They were neglected there for they had fairer complexion. Nurdin had realized that even the peons in Dar “rose above him merely because of their black skins”(28) and in the promotions too “he saw himself overlooked, neglected, as a matter of policy, and felt bitter”(28). When the missionary tries to take life in some car to take the dead body of Nurdin’s father Hazi Lalani to the nearest hospital nobody screeches the brakes of their car the reason behind it all was that “It was driven by a European man and ignored him”(11). It was only when the Missionary stepped onto the road a car stopped and took them to the “European Hospital”.

After Hazi Lalani had died and their business sunk, someone whispered the word “Canada”. Many families were flying to Canada for better prospects and to become “rich”. Roshan, the sister of Nurdin’s wife, urges the Lalanis family to come to Canada. And the family takes a flight to London. The situation of Nurdin in the plane becomes an objective correlative and also it predicts the predicaments he has to suffer in Canada. With his family he is “on the night plane with its magical lights” and reassuring him, travelling through darkness as palpable as any he had known in the “Jungle”. (31, 32) The “Magical lights” of the plane is the mirage inhabit by his mind, and the “darkness of the Jungle” serves as a prediction of the problems he is going to face in Canada - a jungle where the human trees discriminate and torture people by racial discrimination. In the plane “the Asians, for some reason, had been seated together”. (32) At London airport, the immigration officers shatter their dream to halt and see London which was a city “they all knew in their hearts”. (33) “I am sorry, sir, you are refused permission to land in the United Kingdom” (34), and Nurdin could do nothing except calling them “The bastards!”(34)

At Toronto airport, Roshan and her husband receive the Lalanis. Roshan gives them a pack of chewing gum saying “This is Canada”. (35) In a way Roshan tells all about the “multiculturalism” (111) of Canada in a symbolic way that they go on struggling against the problems which never come to an end like a chewing gum. “If you want to get rid of this chewing gum you cannot throw it out of your mouth, you can do this only in your mind; but practically you will have to suck off your mouth out of it to save yourself from the agencies”. (111)

Vassanji’s excellent observation of detail enables him to capture an uneasy blend of human relations in Toronto involving immigrant frustration over job hunting, fear of victimization by Canadian racists, and strategies for survival. After their arrival in Canada, Nurdin and his family plan to move to Don Mills where various members of the East – African community live. What the immigrants have done at Sixty - nine Rosecliffe Park Drive is to turn the whole apartment building into a miniature Dar es Salaam, the city in Tanzania from which they have come.

There is nothing that you cannot buy from one apartment to another whether it is halal meat, toilet supplies or snacks: Sixty - nine Rosecliffe Park (42).

Vassanji, himself a Computer Engineer, failed to get a decent job and hence turned to writing, so does his protagonist Nurdin who remains unemployed for a long time which adds to

his misery. In Canada, in order to land a decent job, one is obliged to have a previous Canadian work experience. He notices that despite his considerable work experience, it is not an easy task for an alien in Canada to find any good job. Neither Nurdin nor his wife can fulfill this requirement. They become increasingly desperate. At one place Nurdin bursts out in anger, “but how can I get Canadian experience if you don’t give me a chance? I have sold shoes for eight years! Eight years!”(48). He cannot fully understand such an absurd situation from his personal point of view and contemplates:

I am a salesman, I was a salesman. Just give me a chance. Why don’t they understand we can do job. ‘Canadian Experience’ is the trump they always call, against which you have no answer (44).

Foreign accent and different or strange pronunciation seem to be another factor determining their failures and numerous difficulties in finding a job or holding down one once given. When Nurdin’s wife works as a receptionist to a Chinese doctor, she is soon fired because she does not use well-pronounced English. The narrator describes the event:

But then, after a few months, she has been dismissed.  
‘Your English’, the doctor had said vaguely (66).

It was only Ramesh, an Indian, who finally helps him to get a job. *No New Land* is a novel which shows the cultural clash between Canadian and Indian culture and tradition. The readers are presented with a number of everyday situations when Nurdin is confronted with a Canadian culture and lured by many its boons. The Indian tradition does not allow them to eat pork or drink alcohol, however, can one reject the temptation being constantly exposed to people eating hamburgers and drinking beer? As the readers conclude, Nurdin as an ordinary and feeble human being is tempted to try beer and sausage. However, he still bears in mind, an Indian saying “Eat pig and become a pig” (128) and he is constantly stricken by deep genuine remorse. He cannot adjust to the new surroundings, not to mention the fact that he actually finds it extremely difficult to accept all the new things he encounters in Canada.

It was not only Nurdin but also Esmail, a quiet man and neighbor of the Lalani family, who falls victim to a rear fatal racial incident. It was the incident of Esmail, another Asian, to which the immigrants of Don Mills reacted strongly. On a subway station, he is viciously attacked by a group of white youths. He unfortunately becomes a noticeable target to the racist assailants. They joyfully abuse him, “Paki!” Esmail is carrying a package of meat pies. They against shout, “What do you have there, Paki? Hey, hey? Paki – Paki – Paki” (95, 96). They punch him in the stomach. The bystanders cannot do anything, Nanji being one among them. Vassanji describes the darkness of the tunnel first: “The subway tunnels were as dark and endless as a moonless, starless sky” (95). Then the author changes his previous statement:

Brakes screeched somewhere along the tracks in a tunnel,  
in which a light was now visible. (96, 97)

This light is the light of hope for the immigrants. This incident provokes the immigrants for agitations. People assemble at Esmail’s residence to console his sister. Once more they are bound to think of their existence, “what now? Was this a sign of things to come danger to self and property, to wife and kids? Have we come to the right place after all?” (102). People come out on the roads shouting slogans. Children too participated in the agitation with provocative placards in their hands;

ESMAIL WE ARE WITH YOU, NO TO APARTHEID,  
LET MY PEOPLE COME (110).

Many persons speak against racial discrimination and what they called Canada is the limit of their hatred against apartheid – “Multiculturalism” (111). Later Esmail establishes himself as a reputed painter.

Nanji, another immigrant from Dar, by whom the readers are made aware of the futility of the Western philosophy in explaining the eastern way of life. He is the part-time professor at the university. He feels more secure with individuals from his own background. He is always worried about the questions of ethics and morality in a new land. He once became a witness to the punks attack fails to muster enough courage to defend his friend from tragedy even though all of them live in the same building, Rosecliffe Park Drive! Such atrocities and partiality the immigrants have to face that they have no option left except ending their lives: said Nanji to Jamal,

The only choice, real choice, man has in the world is whether to go on living - or to commit suicide, end this absurd existence. Have you thought of that? Compared to this, all other questions are trivial, frivolous and irrelevant. (76)

When Jamal comforts him that their God is not dead, Nanji comments, “Can we survive here, without God, Can He survive?”(32) Nanji puts a question mark on his faith that whether even God is capable to help the grim situation. Thus, Nanji is haunted by a fierce guilt that exposes his hollow idealism beneath his Nietzschean Philosophy.

Zera, Nurdin’s wife, feeling disappointment and frustrated with Nurdin, finally, committed to religion and God does not partake in his pleasures completely. This sense of dissatisfaction in Nurdin encourages him to strike a relationship with his childhood friend Sushila, his latest Dar discovery. Sushila, the widow, self-taught to be bold and independent, instills a sense of confidence in her Muslim friend. She is also responsible for raking up his dormant desires:

There was a freedom in her, wholeness, self-sufficiency. Drudgery had not destroyed her charm. (111)

Nurdin’s children become “Canadians” (116). They hate even their father. His son Hanif calls him “an old man” (6). They start hating their origins. His children, on the reverse, seem to rapidly adjust to the new conditions, which makes him aware that being his age he is in possession of same traits and habits which cannot be changed and which prevent him from the assimilation. One day, Nurdin goes to Fatima’s school to take her grade sheet and while returning, the teacher calls him “By doctor” (167). Nurdin refuses that he is not a doctor. On this the teacher informs him, “Well Fatima always talks about her doctor father” (167). The novel ends with an optimistic note. Once again the Lalanis start living a smooth life happily. But it remains a dilemma whether such things will not happen again.

## **Summing Up**

M.G.Vassanji, the pioneer of the South-Asian Canadian Literature, probes beneath the surface to demonstrate a part of the Canadian reality and the present poignant portrait of the immigrant experience in his novel *No New Land*. M.G.Vassanji, whose parents initially belonged to Kutch in Gujarat and later on migrated to East Africa and then to Canada, writes about the Muslims of East Africa in his novel *No New Land*.

The novel describes the adjustment struggles of an Afro-Indian family who settle in Canada after decolonization has deprived them of their foothold in Tanzania while the narrative focuses on middle -aged Nurdin Lalani and his family, their experiences are interspersed with



anecdotes illuminating the parallel difficulties undergone by fellow immigrants of different generations. *No New Land* in this manner creates a kaleidoscope of an immigrant community's attempts at negotiating their individual and collective responses to dislocation and change.

In depicting the trials and errors of his protagonist, M.G.Vassanji is able to draw on an autobiographical material. He is of South Asian origin and grew up in East Africa. Having lived and studied in the USA from 1970 onwards, he came to Canada in 1978 as a physicist. In this novel he narrates a part of his own itinerary, even though he stresses that he never hailed from within the walls of the immigrant ghetto.

The Afro-Asian network of immigrants to which the protagonist belongs plays an important but ambivalent role in their traits 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 life style in Canada exposes the immigrants to problems for which they have no traditional panacea. In this respect, the all-embracing community acts as an impediment rather than as a help, because it prevents its members from entering into a dialogue with Canadian culture and society- or, as the case of Nurdin Lalani shows, affects the necessary processes of negotiation. In this sense, 'arrival' is more than just the physical touchdown in a new country. It refers to the entire stage of settling down in there.

The characters are faced with a double problem of how to manage their integration into a new culture. On the one hand, their personal ambitions need to be re-evaluated. On the other, they have the responsibility towards their community, whose reactions to the new situation often differ from their personal ones. Torn between allegiances to the past, present and future, the characters take some years to really cross the threshold to the new land.

As the title of this article indicates, immigration in *No New Land* is depicted as a drawn-out process which involves an intensive negotiation of change, in the sense both of progress and of degeneration (or regression). Vassanji's novel outlines the ambivalent processes of cultural negotiation undergone by characters who aim to make their own traditions. But, the reality they face is very harsh and awful, and finally they realize that they do not.

In *No New Land* there is no indication that any of the members of the African Indian community are in contact with their original homeland, India. Therefore, the immigrant characters of the novel struggle to come to terms with their own conflicting needs and identities within an unfamiliar environment. They choose to separate themselves from pre-existing connections and instead plunge themselves into an unfamiliar reality. It may be painful for them to accept it as a price of their awareness; it involves recognition of their own situations in time and space to the total cultural complex of the new world. Hence the novel *No New Land* is filled with little, poignant moments and many quiet, yet memorable characters that together paint a very moving portrait of people in transition.

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