

ISSN:0976-8165

THE CRITERION

An International Journal in English



Vol. 7, Issue-I February 2016

7 YEARS OF OPEN ACCESS

www.the-criterion.com

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ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

www.galaxyimrj.com

M G Vassanji's *The Book of Secrets*: A Study of Engendered Culture of Colonized East Africa

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The British imperial Rule subjugated colonies in all possible means and ways which include polity, society and culture. The women of these colonized societies were further oppressed by the customary patriarchy of the social set – up. It is generally observed that any social framework has two typical divisions — public and private — presided over respectively by men and women. This social set - up confined women to the private sphere that excluded them from public platforms. It is an invisible but widespread role of power politics governed by the hegemony. In this situation, issues of disparities get compounded for women. The subjects of power dynamics and the double subjugation of women are cleverly portrayed by M. G. Vassanji — an Asian – African - Canadian writer. Vassanji's multilayered texts present fine illustrations based on the conditions of the marginalized communities in general and underprivileged situation of women in particular. These women persistently work within the domestic boundaries, also help build the nation and are never rewarded.

This paper is an attempt to study Vassanji's novel *The Book of Secrets* that shows how the fictitious people and places are caught by the intertwined role of gender and culture. The text is located in the backdrop of the colonial East Africa where Indians were taken by the British as indentured laborers who with the passing of the time created a cultural milieu. With a view to make a comprehensive approach to the select subject of this paper, the term 'diaspora' is explained with a bird's eye – view.

Diaspora is a constantly recurring historic phenomenon that takes its shape as per the demand of time, situation and people. Since ages, human race, birds, animals have been moving, either out of any (natural or man – made) force or self – will. This movement is not only physical but also cultural and social. The migrant carries,

with [him] a socio-cultural baggage which among other things consists of (a) predefined social identity, (b) a set of religious beliefs and practices, (c) a framework of norms and values governing family and

kinship organization, and food habits and (d) language. More important, the migrants are not inevitably irrevocably cut off completely from the land of their breed. They themselves may retain physical and/or mental contact with their homeland often characterized by what is called 'the myth of return'¹. (Jayaram, 2004:16)

This movement has been majorly observed in three phases — pre - colonial, colonial and post - colonial. The first noticeable reference of the word diaspora is associated with the enslavement of the Jews when Babylonians in Palestine conquered Judah. Jews were then forced to leave their motherland and could never return to their original place. It is termed as a forced migration during pre - colonial era.

Colonial period has also witnessed great dispersion during British imperialism when mass exodus took place in Asian countries where the native population was displaced from its homeland, either to make railways or to work on rubber or sugar plantations in the European countries.

The nature of the post - colonial diaspora is different to that of the previous ones as it emerges more as a self-willed migration where native population migrates to aspiring countries. The major reasons for this migration are:

- Attraction towards the glaring lights of the prosperous countries
- Wish to live life more exuberantly
- The political unsteadiness on the motherland

Hence people struggled as settlers, migrants, transported convicts, slaves or laborers during the first two historical timelines of migration, whereas post colonial diaspora is of the people who have migrated to the prosperous countries of their choices. This migration was also known as brain drain.

The salient features of pre and post colonial diaspora are different in terms of socio-political reasons but the only unique and steady characteristic of diaspora is the umbilical driving heartfelt wish to stay connected to the homeland; and thus to keep socio-cultural and traditional values of the mother country alive. Carrying a rare identity of an Asian, African and Canadian and despite being successful on his adopted lands; Vassanji strongly feels the need to belong to the motherland. This urge is being reflected in his writings when he portrays genuine and original characters that bring forth the issues of journeys, migrations

and dislocations and show how an identity is shaped under the influence of the prevailing social, cultural, political power hierarchies. The embedded roles of power and gender influences sex, place and position that are being ruled and controlled by the one who is powerful. As portrayed in *The Book of Secrets*, the female character of Mariamu, the British Administrator Corbin and the fictitious town Kikono situated between the borderlands of Kenya and Tanzania are caught by the prevalent hegemonic structure of polity and society.

The book covers a period of seventy five years of East Africa under the British rule. The narrative of the book is developed on the basis of the diary written in 1913 by a British colonial administrator and the same diary found in 1988 by a retired school teacher named Pius Fernandes. The diary uncovers the history of East Africa under imperialism mingled with a multi cultural milieu of migrants and natives who live together and share the respective socio-cultural heritage. The pivotal character in the text seems to be of Mariamu whose life saga reveals how her own conservative community and also the agent of modernity and civility—the British utterly failed in honoring her individuality. With a view to bring clarity, this paper is further divided into three parts: (a) Mariamu (b) Corbin and (c) Kikono.

Mariamu:

Mariamu is the niece of the mukhi of the local Samshi community and the founder of Kikono. One of the entries in the diary by the British colonial administrator describes her as “poor wretch, impetuous, silent, proud, quiet, shy” and “good”. (pg. no. 78-79) Her husband Noor Mohammad Pipa finds her as “a celestial being”, “perfectly beautiful” not having the “round features of the shopkeepers’ wives”. This self willed character of Mariamu is described by mukhi as “wild”. He also says “she is inclined to go away by herself”(pg. 50) Thus Mariamu, a distinguished female character, is capable enough to cross the socio cultural borders drawn by the community but her family constrains her behavior. Her step father Rashid keeps an eye on her when she was working as a maid at British Administrator Corbin’s house. Rashid’s stereotype thinking forces mukhi Jamali to marry off Mariamu to Pipa, an unsuccessful merchant. Pipa does not carry good image. The mukhi says: “He, too, has problems, but inshallah, God willing, they can give happiness to each other” and thus poor Mariamu is caught in the trap of the gendered role of the Shamsi community. Her problems heighten when Pipa publically blames and humiliates her for having illegal relations with Corbin and also doubts her virginity. The suspicion provokes Pipa to call her

as a “whore”, a “prostitute”. This is the pathetic situation in Mariamu’s life when she wants her kins to come to save her of the unproven allegation but nobody comes to her rescue; “not her mother, nor her uncle, the mukhi; and her step father had actually confirmed the accusation”. (106). Thus the key female figure of the text; “the daughter of the community” is victimized by her own community people and the British as well. It is through Mariamu’s character that the gender hierarchies prevalent in the society are expressed. The gender stereotypes consider women as secondary in status which is the result of the “socially constructed roles of men and women as active-passive, strong-weak and critical-nurturing”² so on and so forth. It would not be wrong to say that these distinguishing features are further boosted, as it is seen in the text, by racism, colonialism and patriarchy. The character study of the British Administrator Corbin will make the point more clear.

Corbin:

Corbin is a disciplined and noble officer deputed as an ADC in Kikono, the fictitious town located in East Africa. Corbin has been informed that the East Africans are unsophisticated savages and deserve brutal treatment from their rulers, the British. Being forced to execute power upon the weak is a “white man’s burden” to Corbin. Contrary to him is Frank Maynard, a suspended British military captain who easily accepts the gendered role of British and inflicts his power on the east Africans violently and atrociously. Maynard’s power oriented masculinity contrasts with that of Corbin’s disciplined humanitarian masculinity. Being a British ruler, Corbin understands his power over his province. He takes pride in identifying his region as “my caravan” and his people as “my Indians”. These expressions show Corbin’s attachment as well as his ownership over them.

One more gendered role of masculinity is performed by an ADC Woodward from a government station in Voi, who orients Corbin for his colonial service. His advice: “Whenever you find things getting a bit too much for you, go on safari” “And women.....its easier on safari. But don’t bring them back. Concubinage is not tolerated any longer”. This advice clearly shows how women, and more particularly the slave women, are humiliated by the Europeans. These women are doubly wronged by the gendered role of the British Rulers as well as the frame work of their own society.

The closer study of the text makes us feel that Mariamu is the central female character in *The Book of Secrets*. This promising female character remains silent throughout her life though she hails from a powerful familial background as her uncle is the Mukhi of the town.

Her silence begins straight from her meek acceptance to the marriage proposal from Noor Mohammad, an average merchant whom her father selects as her life partner. Mariamu silently accepts this proposal and with the same passivity, hides her infatuation for Corbin. Mariamu's silence disturbs readers when she firmly reserves her feelings when her womanhood is challenged by her husband who accuses her of having illegal relations with Corbin and for bearing Corbin's child in her womb. Mariamu's perpetual, meaningful and intentional silence bewilders the reader to understand her character. This is the same Mariamu who though illiterate, had been lively, having good logical sense, curious in knowing Corbin's purpose of visiting "this dark land", excited to know his area of interest—the characteristics that once impressed Corbin to admire her as the "Eastern queen" and later develop physical relations with her. When her husband doubts her virginity and insults her publically by calling her whore, she remains passive. Hearing the hullabaloo created by Noor regarding his doubts on Mariamu and Corbin, the later visits the place but "walks away, back up the hills to his house. (88) Mariamu's step father Rashid solidifies Noor's doubt that adds insult to injury. Mariamu's humiliation is doubled when Corbin also remains silent even after his knowledge of himself being the suspected culprit. The prospective reasons for Mariamu's perpetual silence may be considered as

1. Mariamu's being raised in a conservative family
2. Her uncle Mukhi Jamali's naive decision to marry her off to a good-for-nothing kind of man Noor Mahmmad
3. Her step father's irresponsible behavior in authenticating the accusation
4. Her husband's immaturity of publically blaming her
5. Her lover Corbin's incompetency in saving her and accepting her.

Or

6. maybe the allegations carry truth

May the reason be any but the ultimate conclusion is that the dominance of patriarchy is so strong that it suppresses her voice. And Mariamu being a woman of her own, feels to be vulnerable in keeping silence. Caught in the web of patriarchy and being discouraged in all her worldly relations, she develops the sense of withdrawal. Noor Mohammad realises his thoughtless behavior of publically insulting her, decides to start afresh in a nearby town Moshi where Mariamu gives birth to a boy who has fair complexion and grey eyes.(156) These features revive Noor Mohammad's doubts for Mariamu's relations with Corbin. During the war between Germans and British for the power over east Africa, Noor

Mohammad is caught by the German Police for helping the British. Mariamu's husband is beaten severely and she is being "violated"(171) raped and murdered. Finding himself unable to raise the child, Noor sends the child to Mukhi of Kikono and his wife khanoum who after her being widow and being struck by poverty sends the child to Aku's rich and humble European father through two Indian women who were sent by Corbin himself who wanted custody of the child. Vassanji withholds the identity of Aku's father and thus he keeps the mystery alive. Even as a spirit, Mariamu does not answer this question and remains decidedly silent when asked to reveal the name of Aku's biological father. This is the subject that "Mariamu had never discussed, never acknowledged, never denied". (204)

Engulfed by the power politics of social and political hierarchies, Mariamu is the character who receives love devoid of dignity from her admirer Corbin, but both these feelings are missing in her relation with her husband. The erstwhile boisterous character of Mariamu is disrespected by her father, friend cum lover and also husband. Mariamu's brutal death questions the voicelessness of all the women who are trapped in the patriarchal system. The saga of Mariamu is being replicated over the years. It would be paradoxical to say that Mariamu is no more. She is an immortal character and pauses a train of questions to the human race about a woman's right to speak.

Kikono:

Kikono is also as helpless as Mariamu and also to some extent as the ADC Corbin. Once used, all remain unattended. Poor Mariamu died a disrespectful death. So was the case of Kikono. British and Germans fought for the power over East Africa. In the survival of the fittest, the British won. Vassanji describes the post war situation in Kikono where everything is forgotten. "No new ADC came to administer its affairs and those of the neighboring area. Newspapers from Nairobi and Mombasa were slow to arrive, rumours came faster; speculation grew – concerning booming business in the large centers, cheap properties to hold on to in Tanga and Moshi and Dar as the Germans and their allies lost all. (189) The Swahili proverb, "when two elephants fight it is the grass that suffers" (149) speaks about the gendered socio-political thinking. People started moving from Kikono to more aspiring cities. And thus the migration remains the constant phenomenon. In the course of the book we see that Aku and her English girlfriend elope to London via Nairobi.

The gendered reading of the text draws attention of the reader also to the homosexual relation of Pius Fernandes to a fellow teacher Richard Gregory. Vassanji cleverly interrogates

gender-power relations by developing a relation between Fernandese—a Goan Indian and Gregory—an exiled white British male. Fernandes says: “We (the people of Dar who are on the brink of Independence) were intensely aware of our essential homelessness. Our world was diminishing with the empire”. About his own relation with Gregory, Fernandes says that it was a friendship “of two men thrown together by fate who were reasonably tolerant...and who saw humanness in each other’. (274-275) Thus, homelessness, humanity and tolerant nature bring them together. Vassanji very successfully balances the gender roles in the text and provides us with two open platforms to understand the socio-political hierarchies in the light of (1) emancipation and silencing of the less powerful and (2) open acceptance to the relations that are based on sameness in nature, situation and sensibilities.

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