

# Retrieving History through Fiction: A Study of M. G. Vassanji's *The Magic of Saida*

## Abstract

In postcolonial literature, writing historical fiction from the margins also involves the breaking of stereotypes about a race or a community. M. G. Vassanji, the most prominent and prolific novelist of South-Asian origin in East-Africa, assesses how important of a role can contemporary literature play as a vehicle for exploring the history of people hitherto being silenced. This paper sets out to probe the misrepresentation of the marginalized immigrant community of Indians in East Africa (broadly termed as Asians after 1947 CE) in his novel *The Magic of Saida*. Here again Vassanji's protagonist is obsessed with the mysterious past which casts a spell over his present life. Whereas in the previous works his protagonists visit Africa mentally, here in this novel, Kamal Punja actually undertakes a physical journey to Africa. He is ceaselessly haunted by the memories of his childhood sweetheart and the place of his birth. Finally, to put to rest the burden of history, he abandons his wife and children in Canada and embarks upon a journey to Africa.

**Keywords:** Postcolonial Literature, Postmodernism, M. G. Vassanji.

## Introduction

The issue of fiction being employed as a vehicle for writing corrective/counter history has gathered much critical attention over the past few years. This has happened especially after the critical currents of Postmodernism, Postcolonialism and New Historicism made waves in the circles of literary theory. Literary fiction and history are now being considered as mutually dependent owing to the narrative techniques that the language offers to write down anything and everything under the sun. Some critics go far to the point of saying that all history is literature, so that there remains no need to exalt history to the position of a scientific subject and treat literature as a lesser discipline. Literature has now become an all encompassing tool to decode any discipline. It is a perfect vehicle for voicing one's opinion as it can get moulded in any form or style (satirical, comical, romantic, etc) and can reach masses without necessarily sounding politically incorrect.

## Objective of the Study

The main objective of this research paper lies in bringing into foreground the plight of African-Asians in East Africa by engaging in a detailed analysis of Vassanji's fictional renderings of this community.

Counter-history is one of the outcomes of the New Historicist perspectives. It can be seen in the newer forms of feminist, anti-racist, working-class literature that whatever is written constitutes an attempt of ordinary and oppressed people to counter the history of the oppressor. Catherine Gallagher, argues in *Practicing New Historicism* that:

Counter-history opposes itself not only to dominant narratives, but also to prevailing modes of historical thought and methods of research . . . and Funkenstein claims that history as a discipline has its roots in rebellion against the convenient, self-justifying, official stories of priests and rulers. (52)

A major role in writing the counter or corrective history of any community in the world engages the question of representation and identity. Stuart Hall defines representation as "using language to say something meaningful about, or to represent, the world meaningfully, to other people" ("The Work of Representation" 15). The whole phenomenon of representation becomes problematic when the question of stereotyping is dragged into it. More often than not, in the postcolonial literature, writing history from the margins involves the breaking of stereotypes about a race



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or a community. Stereotyping involves a particular set of representational practices. It reduces people to a few essential characteristics which are then deemed as fixed by nature. In aggravating racial difference, stereotyping plays a major role. In its negative form, it results in the formation of a negative identity. It is this formation of a negative cultural identity of East African Asians that Vassanji strives to challenge through his fiction.

Moyez Gulamhussein Vassanji is the most prominent and prolific novelist of South-Asian East-African origin. Being born and brought up in Africa, the continent exercises a powerful hold over his imagination. In his fiction, he provides the perspective of an insider—being well-versed in the language, culture and political history of the continent. The colonial and post-colonial history of Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, and Zanzibar serves as the backdrop for most of his novels and story collections. In an interview by James Bland in the *Globe and Mail*, Vassanji explains his perpetual motivation for writing historical fiction about the African Asians in the following words: “For me, I come from a culture where there's no writing about ourselves as such. There are a lot of oral tales, and so for the first time to write something about people who've not been written about at an intimate level, there's a big hurdle. I overcame it, for some reason, I found the guts to do it.”

*The Magic of Saida* (2012) tries to claim the truth about the neglected history and a negative cultural identity of East-African Asians during the turbulent times of colonialism and independence in the erstwhile territories of German and British East Africa. The novel extensively deals with the issue of African Nationalism during the pre-independence era and its aftermath. The strict German rule and the sufferings of the half-breeds (African-Asians) as well as the native Africans form the major content of the novel. It revolves around the life of Kamal Punja, a Tanzanian immigrant to Canada with Indian ancestral origin. What makes this novel stand apart from Vassanji's earlier novels is the fact that it presents to the world the perspective of a half-African, half-Indian Kamal. The novel represents that how being perceived as a “chotaro” (half-caste), he conducts his affairs in the world.

The opening of the novel *The Magic of Saida* is set in the twenty-first century. The prologue begins with an unexpected meeting between publisher Martin Kigoma and Kamal Punja in a hospital in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, where Kamal has been admitted after being drugged. Kamal tells Kigoma that he has recently abandoned his family and medical practice in Edmonton, Canada, and has returned to his childhood home of Kilwa to seek his first love, Saida. Kamal fondly calls her Kinjikitilé. Thus begins the story of Kamal's life which is interpolated through Kigoma's narration. Vassanji's strength is the vastness of his canvas. Taking the personal history of Kamal and Saida as a point of departure, he weaves the political history of East Africa, its trade ties with India and various anti-colonialist movements into the fictional tapestry of this novel. The novel also adds to the

reader's understanding of German colonial history in Africa as well as the underrepresented stories of Africans in India.

Kamal Punja's ancestors traveled from India to East Africa in the late nineteenth century. His family history is intriguing. Kamal was born in Kilwa, a small island on the South coast of Tanzania. He is a “chotaro”—a Swahili term for a mixed-blood—an offspring of an Indian father and an African mother. Kamal's father abandoned his mother to go back to India when Kamal was a little boy. At the age of eleven, one of Kamal's paternal uncles pays Kamal's mother to adopt him, and eventually raises him as part of his Indian community in Africa, cut off from his African heritage. When forced to leave his mother, Kamal also leaves behind his childhood love, Saida—the African granddaughter of local poet Mzee Omari bin Tamim, a man with a complex relationship with the German colonizers.

As the story unfolds, Kamal goes off to university in neighbouring Uganda, but as a result of major political upheavals, Idi Amin comes to power and Kamal and his friend Shamim (who eventually becomes his wife) immigrate to Canada. Thirty-five years later, Kamal, now a successful doctor and father of two children, is haunted by memories of his early childhood. He is drawn back to Kilwa by his magical bond and love for Saida, and the unresolved questions about why his mother too abandoned him.

*The Magic of Saida* encompasses a brief history of slavery and the process of indenture and migration of Indian community to Africa in search of employment. Embedded in it is the history of colonial resistance and the Maji Maji and Mau Mau upheaval in the continent. It chronicles the racial conflict between black and white and also between black and brown (the people of Asian origin) which compel the African-Asians to flee to new lands. The novel also deals extensively with the issue of the relationship between African women and Asian men. Yash P. Ghai writes thus in the book *Portrait of a Minority: Asians of East Africa*.

The Asians are extremely communal-minded, conscious of caste differences, intensely endogamous . . . . The Asians wanted to be left alone to pursue their own traditional ways and thus to maintain their culture. Laws were enacted in East Africa providing for the application of personal, religious laws, e.g., marriage, divorce, succession, to the Asian religious communities. This helped not only to preserve the cultural identity of these communities, but also put obstacles in the way of inter-communal and inter-racial contacts. (Ghai 132)

This issue has always been a debatable one as it is alleged that Asian men did not honour African women as their wives but kept them as concubines. In some instances they also abandoned them as happened with Kamal's mother, Hamida. Kamal's father, Dr Amin Punja settled in Kilwa as he found the city habitable when he had come to pay respects to the remains of his grandfather. She tells him that

although her husband abandoned them early in life, he still loved them and got themselves pictured in a frame that hung in the house till date. He also left some money in the post-office so that she could have some sort of financial certainty and bring up their son well. At this tender age, innocent Kamal agrees to what his mother offers him as an explanation about the relationship between her and Dr Amin Punja, but later in life when he goes to Dar es Salaam, his anger knows no bound when he discovers his Indian Uncle's sexual escapades with an African woman. He feels sorry for the African girl and a feeling of doubt about his father's loyalty to his mother overpowers him. He wonders:

Was this how his father had seen Mama?  
Is this what she had meant to him? That couldn't have been the case, his father had had a studio photo taken with him and his mama; acknowledging togetherness, he had left money for them in a post office account. But he had gone away. How much of what Mama had told him about his father was true, how much fanciful? And Mama herself, who had been paid for him . . . who never wrote to him—was she true?

This complex novel is also about the intense identity crisis of Kamal who is rejected by both the races. The Africans do not accept him as an African and the Indians reject him because of his black colour. His mother wants him to be an Indian and leaves him forever. The land of his birth, Africa compels him to leave the continent as he is an Indian. He is left in a precarious situation of not belonging anywhere and thus embarks on a journey to find his roots. He digs upon his family history and finally finds an anchorage. He comes to know about how his grandfather made a cause with the Africans in their struggle for independence. Just as Vikram's Mahesh Uncle in *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall* is empathetic towards the natives, likewise Devraj Punja helps the African tribes in their conspiracy to overthrow the German rule.

Punja was now the man of the coast, a respected Indian trader and honorary Swahili who was convinced by now that Sidi Sayyad of Singpur had sent him to Africa with a noble purpose: to help his people, the Africans, resist the onslaught of the Europeans. He gave himself a place name, in Indian fashion, so that he was now Punja Devraj Swahil. . . He would do all he could to help resist the invasion of his adopted land. (139)

Punja Devraj helped the fellow Africans by continuously receiving and stocking arms and ammunition behind his shopfront covertly. He maintained an inventory of weapons and donations for any war in the future. For this work, he took the help of Omari's brother Abdelkarim who acted as a scribe. Abdelkarim's brother, Omari, would accompany him to Punja's shop and therefore had a fair knowledge of what was going on. This knowledge on the part of Omari proved to be fatal as he conveyed this information to the Germans and the Germans captured Punja Devraj and four other Africans. These

people were hanged from the large mango tree in the central square of Kilwa. Thus, he laid down his life for the African cause and became a perfect example of an empathetic human being.

In his own adulthood, Kamal experiences a conflict of loyalties during the turbulent time of decolonisation in East Africa. Vassanji depicts this event in the novel while narrating his university days in Uganda. The country of Tanzania was declared an enemy of Uganda as it refused to recognise the new government and offered political asylum to the deposed President Milton Obote. All the Tanzanian students were asked to vacate the university campus in Kampala. The status of Kamal and Shamim too fell under these new commandments and they awaited the call from their own country. These times of stress and terror made them an emotional support for each other and glued them for life. General Idi Amin ordered the expulsion of all the Asians from Uganda and gave them three months to leave. Reverse racism became the order of the day and it were the Asians who were teased and bullied by the African natives. Overnight they became "aliens," "foreigners," "economic saboteurs," "engineers of corruption" (261). Their properties were confiscated. The African crowds cheered the decision of the General. Kamal too was taken by in this mass euphoria and in some part of his heart cheered for the long oppressed Africans. But he was also terrified by the memory of the fateful night when he and Shamim were harassed by the African soldiers. It was a loud cry by Shamim that became their saving grace and they both returned to the hostel safely, though they had lost some precious objects. Kamal finds himself at the cross-roads because, being a half-caste, he was happy that Africans will now get their due and will be once again able to raise their heads high. Vassanji describes the condition of Kamal thus:

It was the Golo in him who sent up the partial cheer for Idi Amin. It was the half-caste who had identified with the house servants ("boys"), flinched at their abuse and humiliations, and suffered his own share of them in school. It was the boy who had cried for his African mother and his special friend in Kilwa. He recalled his horror and shame when he saw a young African woman coming out of his uncle's back room. He had been reminded of his mother—and wept at night because he was nothing but a half-caste bastard. (261)

But soon it occurs to him that everything is not as straightforward as it seems. He recalls the contribution of his ancestor Devraj Punja who had added "Swahil" to his name to show openly to the world that he belongs to the place. He remembers that the famous poet Mzee Omari had sung in his praise and composed poems about his role in sabotaging against the colonists in the favour of the Africans. Moreover, it suddenly flashes in his mind that Idi Amin himself had once served as a soldier for the British and had even gone hunting for the Mau Mau in Kenya. Thus, there was no yardstick to judge people from their nationality.

Patriotic emotions ran high in Uganda during the Asian exodus of 1972 and there was a long queue of Africans who were desperate to take over the businesses from the departing Asians. On the other hand, a feeling of betrayal and uncertainty hung over the Asian minds. They were literally plucked and thrown out of the country. They mobbed the embassies of countries like Britain, Canada, the United States and requested to let them in. In Kampala, the prayer houses became the meeting points of thus uprooted people and offered them whatever amount of solace was left to gather. The agony of the people is thus captured in the following words from the text:

Here gathered all the bitterness, pain, and grief of a people ordered to leave their homes and life's savings behind and simply go away. Here was the heartache of families whose fate it was to be dispersed over several countries, as they devised schemes to stay in touch and ultimately reunite somewhere on the globe. Those headed for refugee camps did not know on what continent they would end up. There were horror stories to be heard, of home invasions, molestations, and abductions. (262)

As Kamal witnesses the scenes at the refugee camps, he feels guilty of having silently cheered for Idi Amin. He calls his blunder as "a half cheer from a half-caste" (263). He and Shamim take upon themselves the task of helping people with their paperwork at the refugee camps and the khanos as they await their own fate. One day Shamim encounters a man from Canada who asks her that why doesn't she apply for a visa for herself. Shamim is rather shocked at this possibility. Nevertheless, she gives it a thought and makes a proposal to Kamal and asks him if there is any possibility to this question. Kamal refuses bluntly and thinks:

What a thought. To go away, kabisa— forever. It was impossible, he would never do that. He could not imagine himself anywhere else but in the streets of Dar es Salaam; or Kilwa, though perhaps not, it would seem so small. One crazy general in Uganda didn't mean Asians had to leave Tanzania too. He had not seen any Asian happy to be going away. Why should anyone volunteer? And he was an African. (263)

Thus the text becomes a means of recording the history of displaced people in a rather fictional form. Thematically, just like Vassanji's other texts, this novel once again tries to highlight the contribution of the Asians in the African struggle for independence. Kamal's great grandfather's sacrifice, which is an Indian immigrant, finds place in Mzee Omari's recitations. Devraj Punja was hanged on the charges of conspiring against the German government. His uncle Jaffu too rescues him when he is bullied in school for being a half-caste by warning the headmaster that he might be deported back against the charges of harassing an African child.

Coming back to the theoretical aspect of this novel, about the relationship between history and literature, there occurs an important event in Kamal's school. One day a teacher named Mr Fernandes, who teaches English and history, asks the students to compose an essay on the topic 'The First War of Independence,' referring to the Maji Maji war. He finds Kamal's essay outstanding and asks him about the source for his essay. Kamal had not only consulted the textbook but also used the poems that he had heard from Mzee Omari, back in his days in Kilwa. He tells Mr Fernandes that he knew a poet named Mzee Omari and has used his poetical recitations as a source:

Did they count as a source? He thought they were, for in them the old poet wrote what he remembered. Or thought he remembered, Mr. Fernandes corrected. Still, he admitted, Kamal's source was an important one, an original one. Not many people thought of poems as historical sources, but they were. (233)

Thus, Mr. Fernandes encourages his students to use unconventional sources for writing history. Owing to his interest in literature and history, Kamal is soon made a member of the Dramatics Society, the Literary Society and the History Society. And later on, he was made the prefect. Mr Fernandes was very keen on Kamal taking up history or literature at the university level but Kamal argued that he wanted to study science and become a doctor as he wanted to serve the nation. But Mr. Fernandes pleaded: "The nation needs to learn about our poets. The world needs to know about our poets. We need to write our stories . . . History is not useless, Kamal. Literature is not useless. Think about it" (234). Therefore, fiction becomes an important tool to hand over the history of marginalised people down to the successive generations.

### Conclusion

In this novel, Vassanji is most vocal about his love for literature. Through the character of Mr. Fernandes, Vassanji voices his own opinion that literature could too serve as a means of writing history. Vassanji's opinion is reflected in the words of Ghanaian writer Ben Assamoah, who visits Kamal's school and says: "But I have one overall comment to all budding African writers. Write about what you know. Why write about England? What do you know about living in New York? Write about Dar es Salaam, write about Tanzania. Those are the stories we need" (239).

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