



Asserting Syncretic Identity in the Select Works of M.G. Vassanji

Abstract:

With the increased transnationalism and globalization diaspora studies have emerged as vibrant area of research making 'new' diasporic literature and culture, today, particularly important in Canada and elsewhere. Year 2011 had been called the year of India in Canada, This entire year was dedicated to building stronger ties between the two nations elevating the importance of Diaspora studies more than ever before. Diasporic writers translate reality and their personal experiences into two or more different systems which is why their work can be regarded as enrichment of both the cultures and an important part of the emerging cosmopolitan culture-'trans-culture'.

Contemporary Canadian writers have increasingly come to be seen as trans-cultural, transnational authors-the writers of 'two homelands' in global space and Canadian multi-ethnic society where the so called "minority literature" is now a part of the main stream. This paper, in general, focuses on how Diasporic writing today, connects the past(old) and present(new) and forms a new fluid transnational identity and opens up spaces for new expressions of a transnational global culture; and in particular, it seeks to examine select works of M.G.Vassanji as showing a pattern when analyzed from the point of view of double displacement of characters and the question of their assertion of a syncretic identity. It traces the journey from 'old Diaspora' to the 'new' one concluding that Diasporas may have its traumas, its anguish, its challenges but finally it is not about enclosure but open spaces, it is about intermingling and interruptions. It is this joy of having a double vision and the pain of being split through and through, of carrying a nation on their backs as they work through a different history, distant culture and fluid memory which characterize the Diaspora, it's Indian-ness and its experience.

Keywords: Transnationalism, diaspora, trans-culture, cosmopolitanism, syncretic identity.

Diaspora- the 'dispersal' of various peoples(forced or by choice) around the world often caused by major historical and political changes, carries with it collective cultural memory and capital of the past, the acknowledgement of the 'homeland' as a concept deeply embedded in an individual language, religion, customs and folklore. Diasporic Literature , generally speaking is concerned with two relationships- one with the homeland which gives rise to nostalgia, memories and reminiscences and the other to the adopted country; the hostland which gives rise to conflicts. That is why diasporic writers speak of alienation, loneliness, rootlessness, exile, cultural conflicts and a sense of rejection by the host country. An immigrant suffers numerous forms of disruptions, as Salman Rushdie says,

A full migrant suffers a triple disruption:he loses his place, he enters into an alien language and he feels himself surrounded by beings whose social behaviour is very unlike... his own. And this is what makes migrants such important figures: because roots, language, social norms have been three of the most important parts of the definition of what it is to be a human being. The migrant denied all three, is obliged to find new ways of being human. (277-278).

Old/Classical Diaspora theory thus revolves around the concept of ethnicity and the unifying category, as the proof origin,which re asserts the group solidarity and commonality. One of the first scholars to establish the main criteria of the classical theory is William Safran who, in his short article-'Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return' describes diasporic literature having following characteristics:

1) Dispersal from a Centre to two or more peripheral or foreign regions.

2) Retention of collective memory, vision or myth.

3) The belief that full acceptance by the host country is not possible, resulting in alienation.

4) Regard for ancestral homeland as the true and ideal home and the place for final return.

The old Diaspora thus does not allow one to go beyond the accepted characteristics such as ethnicity, dispersal, homeland and origin; neither does it provide an analytical framework to fully understand the phenomenon of Diaspora as social condition or societal process.

However, today we are living in an age of increasing interconnectedness where migration is mainly because of a desire for upward mobility which comes through education, an increased awareness of better prospects and sense of ambition. People throughout all the layers of society are “on the move” across the planet experiencing by choice the effects of dislocation, de-territorialization and cross cultural acculturation. Hence the growing influence of views and approaches related to Transnationalism, Neo cosmopolitanism, flexible citizenship, transculturalism theorize the dynamic nature of Globalization. This socio-cultural scenario has given birth to a new generation of culturally mobile writers, ‘transcultural writers’; the writers who by choice or by life circumstances experience cultural dislocation, live transnational experiences, cultivate plurilingual proficiency, physically immerse themselves in multiple cultures, expose themselves to diversity and nurture plural and flexible identities. While moving across the globe and across different cultures they find themselves less and less trapped in traditional migrant/exile system and become more apt to embrace the opportunities and freedom that diversity and mobility bestow upon them. As Stuart Hall puts it,

Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and differences” (Hall,235)

Thus new Diaspora writings characterize:

1) The fact of dispersal from one to many locations and the existence of the triadic relationship between original homeland, ethnic community and the hostland.

2) the everlasting feeling of longing for homeland but lack of desire to return.

3) the process of transnationalisation and networking among communities of a given ethnic group and finally..

4) strengthening connections with homeland living in hostland.

Traumatic dispersal, longing for and belonging to ancestral homeland, collective knowledge of ethnic identity, alienation from the host society no doubt form an intrinsic part of Diasporic literature even today but it has moved beyond these issues.

Theoretical innovations of Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak, Stuart Hall, Paul Gilroy, James Clifford and others have in recent years, vitalized Post Colonial and Diaspora studies challenging ways in which we understand ‘Culture’ and developing new ways of thinking beyond the confines of the nation state. Recent studies see migrancy in terms of adaptation and construction; adaptation to changes and transformations and new ways of defining ‘identity’. In an interview Salman Rushdie said’

The whole notion of crossing over or moving from one identity to another is extremely important to me, being as I am – as well as we all are, a sort of hybrid. (Said1995, 122).

Diasporic writing today connects the past and the present and forges new notions of fluid and transnational identities, thus opening up spaces for new expressions of a transnational global culture. It seriously challenges the centre-periphery, colony-empire, ethnic-mainstream, pure-hybrid scholarly debates positioning traditional postcolonial studies.

Contemporary Canadian Diasporic writers have thus increasingly come to be seen as transcultural and transnational authors-writers of two homelands figuring in global collage space and in multi ethnic, post ethnic society where so called minority literature is now a part of the mainstream. Canada has come a long way from the model of Canadian Cultural Mosaic, a cliché used to express the much sought unity through diversity and is today quite proud of its self image as a multicultural country (inspite of a lot of criticism against the policy). The concept of ‘ethnic mosaic’ within the multicultural paradigm in Canada

has resulted in artists of different backgrounds promoting their own and thus Canadian Culture as in case of now internationally renowned authors such as Michael Ondaatje, Margaret Atwood, Yann Martel, Uma Parmeshwaran, Anita Rau Badami, Rohinton Mistry and M.G.Vassanji to name a few. Martel in recent interview recorded at the launching of the translation of his novel Life of Pi (also a movie now) said something that seems an interesting description of the complexity of Canadian Literature and its chameleon like quality which can be perceived as a state of mind:

A Canadian novel does not necessarily take place in Canada. So may be it is the chameleon like quality of Canadian Literature that makes it typical. There is something polymorphous about Canadian Literature.... Canada is a state of mind. Canadian is whoever says that he/she is

Recent Canadian texts feature a new Westernized/ Canadianized protagonist who does not so much want to return home as to write back home. For eg. Anita Rau Badami, The Hero's Walk; Michael Ondaatje, Anil's Ghost; Janice Keefer, Honey and Ashes: A Story of Family, Rohinton Mistry and M.G.Vassanji...

To elaborately explain the idea in No New Land By M.G. Vassanji, Haji Lalani comes from India at the age of sixteen to make his fortune in East Africa and thinks that he has found a new country for his children and dies at a ripe old age. He feels a little nostalgic about his home across the ocean but thinks that he had brought their India with them . Ironically he does not know that in another two years everything he had taken as permanent would change and his son, with his whole family would depart to another new country up north: " It was as if with Haji Lalani the whole era died, a way of life disappeared." It exemplifies the idea of 'positionality' : cultural, historical and political situations are human constructs and the whole ambience or context can change with a change in political ideology. The heaven that Haji Lalani had created for his children becomes an insecure and threatened space with the independence of Africa, which changes all inter racial 'positionalities'. In Vassanji's No New Land, the narrative starts from a scene of calamity in Toronto, for Nurdin has been accused of having molested a white girl. This opening scene indicates the constant threat that the immigrant is under, identified as an 'outsider'. Nurdin's story is a histriographic account of an immigrant experience, right from the moment of his landing in Toronto to the end when he is acquitted of the charge of molestation and hence gets his respectable status back. Vassanji's excellent observation of detail enable 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. The only other way to combat the racism and otherness is by being too good at their own game, that is success and confidence as is embodied in Jamaal. The first generation migrants might have certain difficulties in adjusting to the new ambience but the second generation adapt well since they are willing to assimilate into the Canadian culture this is what would make them socially acceptable among their peers. Hence, the picture is clear: success is what counts in this new competitive world and the confidence to brazen out all marginalizing tactics and demand one's rights. As Rocio G Davis states, "The experience of immigration and its effects on subsequent generations has proven to be an unprecedeted source of creative energy in the last few decades."

The South Asian writers, who have migrated to Canada, negotiate the maze of memory and experience to re-create and reshape their new identity. They work from a vantage point of distanced perspective, in order to understand and come to terms with the past and from there manipulate the present. One explanation of the preoccupation with the past is given by M.G.Vassanji in his essay " South Asian Literature in Canada" when he states that "need to recreate, mythify, and explain can be traced to two not unrelated factors: the rapid disappearance of a way of life, which was often held, in place and static, by the colonial government: and the rapid and continuing modernization of the Third World."

The concern of the writers of the Diaspora is not only with memory and nostalgia but also with place and displacement, where place is signified not only as a geographical -physical space but also the mentally conjured up psychological space. As the individual moves from one cultural space to another, the culture of the land of origin within the immigrant is constantly interacting and contesting with the new culture of the adopted land, so that the transcultural persona is always in motion in a process of

reconstruction, constantly remaking itself and seeking new affiliations. Consider a novel like *The Gunny Sack* where M.G.Vassanji problematizes the concept of boundaries and space by questioning the primary space homeland for Sona and Kala: is Africa their homeland, the place where they were born and grew up and which is the only home that they, as fourth generation immigrants, have known; or is it Cutch in India that they have not seen but only know as the homeland of their ancestors, which is locked in the memory of Ji Bai and given to them as knowledge from the past: or is their homeland the present location of their migration to a new country? As the secondary space of the first generation gradually becomes the primary space for the next generations. Hence it is appropriate to use Vassanji's words to describe this constantly evolving identity which is the result of transmigration and transculturalization:

Not uprooting and moving boundaries, but simply setting them afloat and free, for an identity, a literature, in the broad sense, is to grow, to explore and define itself; and perhaps keep on defining itself.

The modern immigrant is always forward looking; no matter how difficult adaptability to the changed situation is, he never thinks of returning to his past. He may look back in memories and nostalgia, he may gain strength from his past but he always looks forward. In Vassanji's *The Book of Secrets*, Pipa is such a character who has learnt to survive at all costs realizing that life must be lived in its shades of grey, never the pure white of idealism nor the black of despair.

Janice Keefer in her article, 'The Sacredness of Bridges' : Writing Immigrant Experience' speaks about the racism and marginalization that immigrants had to face in Canada, but then she goes on to talk about a changing climate in the country where there is now an effort being made to understand each other's 'differences'. Times have changed: the diaspora is well endorsed in Canada and by legislature the policy of Multiculturalism has given them rights equivalent to any other Canadian. The new generations are able to absorb both cultures into themselves and being hybrid personalities are more hardy and better adjusted to their environment. The protagonist of Vassanji's novel explores the apparently Utopian space beyond the national boundaries of India. In each instance, however, it is seen that though there may have been certain materialistic gains for the individual, yet the state of happiness and contentment that he desires is actually a mental state that can be achieved by compromise, adjustments and accommodation to one's socio cultural surroundings. Gustad, Dina Dayal, and the two tailors, Ishwar and Omprakash, manage to achieve this and Nurdin, too, seems to be arriving at the state of acceptance.

Modern hybrid texts focuses on the continual and mutual development of the traditions from which it has evolved. Hence instead of multicultural literary scene it is better to use Janice Keefer's term and call the Canadian literary scene "transcultural", as she says:

What is important in transcultural writing is the circulation and exchange of ideas, energies, vision between different ethno cultural groups as well as between the 'centre' and 'margin', 'dominant' and 'minority' groups.

The idea behind calling these writers trans cultural writers is that these writers distance themselves and go beyond politically and culturally constructed categories of 'migrant writer' 'ethnic writer', 'writer of New Literature in English' and so on... Salman Rushdie who could be inscribed within a transcultural discourse, despite of being indiscriminately defined by critics and scholars as migrant/ exile/ post-colonial writer commented on his annoyance about being ethnically labeled: "In my own case, I have constantly been asked whether I am a British or an Indian. The formulation 'Indian born British writer' has been invented to explain me. But my new book deals with Pakistan so what now? British resident Indo-Pakistani Writer? You see the folly of trying to contain writers inside passports. One of the most absurd aspects of this quest for national authenticity is that....it is completely fallacious to suppose that there is such a thing as a pure, unalloyed tradition from which to draw."

To conclude I would just like to say that in our rapidly globalizing world, culture as well as societies and identities tend to be more fluid and less intermingled, less territorially fixed than in the past. The main element that distinguishes these new diasporic writers from their precursors is their relaxed

attitude when facing issues linked to identity, nationality, rootlessness and dislocation. Hence the significance of the transcultural 'transforming' experience enhanced by its literary expressions that instead of heightening conflicts and cultural clashes, it promotes the value of 'confluence', fruitful encounters and mutual respect dismantling boundaries instead of erecting new barriers encouraging a new sense of communal identity, thus asserting a 'Syncretic' identity.

Displacement and transplacement and fluid transnational post-ethnic diasporic identity show a dynamic and shifting global view of some of the best Canadian diasporic authors. Their increasingly empowered vision and voice have pluralized and globalized contemporary Canadian literary production.

Works Cited

Primary Sources

- I. Vassanji, M.G. *The Gunny Sack*. 1989. Viking: Penguin, 1990.
- II. *No New Land*. New Delhi: Penguin, 1991.
- III. *The Book of Secrets*. Toronto: McClelland, 1992.
- IV. *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall*. Canada: Doubleday, 2003.

Secondary Sources

- I. Alexander, Meena. *Fault Lines*. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1993.
- II. Alexander, V., (2003). "Postponed Arrivals: The Afro-Asian Diaspora in MG
- III. Vassanji's *No New Land*". *Diaspora and Multiculturalism: Common Traditions and New Developments*. Ed. M. Fludernik. Amsterdam: Rodopi. pp. 199-230.
- IV. Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso, 1995.
- V. Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin. *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Postcolonial Literatures*. London: Routledge, 2002.
- VI. Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1994.
- VII. Gilroy, Paul. *Between Camps: Nations, Cultures and The Allure of Race*. London: Allen Lane The Penguin P, 2000.
- VIII. Hall, Stuart. *Ethnicity: Identity and Difference*. *Radical America* 23.4 (1991): 9-20.
- IX. Kroetsch, Robert. "The Canadian Writer and the American Literary Tradition." *The Lovely Treachery of Words: Essays Selected and New*. Toronto: Oxford UP, 1989. 53-57.
- X. Kroetsch, Robert. "No Name is My Name." *The Lovely Treachery of Words: Essays Selected and New*. Toronto: Oxford UP, 1989. 41-52.
- XI. Kroetsch, Robert. "Unhiding the Hidden." *The Lovely Treachery of Words: Essays Selected and New..* Toronto: Oxford UP, 1989. 58-63.
- XII. McClintock, Anne. *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest*. London: Routledge, 1995.
- XIII. Schulze-Engler, Frank. "Changing Spaces: Globalisation, Migration, and the Post-Colonial Transition." *Borderlands: Negotiating Boundaries in Post-Colonial Writing*. Ed. Monika ReifHülser. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1999. 3-15.
- XIV. Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. Ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence, Grossberg. London: Macmillan, 1988. 271-313.

Nairuti Parikh

Assistant Professor

Dept. of English

Som Lalit College of Commerce

Ahmedabad

Copyright © 2012 - 2018 KCG. All Rights Reserved. | Powered By: Knowledge Consortium of Gujarat