

**BELONGINGNESS AND DISLOCATION: THE RIDDLE OF
DIASPORIC EXPERIENCE**

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In the present-day world dispensation, while everyone is everywhere and the global village seems to be home to all, there are, ironically enough, very few who are really *at home* with this world order (Cohen, 2007). Our globe today shows contours of nations, the purported homes to humankind, and these nations are part of the colonial legacy, so is the whole of the post-colonial world order. As it is, this order of things resulted from a commercial venture: the ships sailed all over crisis-crossing the waters between continents, and it changed the world-map forever. It not only brought races and cultures together but in the process, impacted everything- race, culture, community, religion and the individual self too. And the world that emerged from this experience came to be the one populated by exiles, immigrants, expellees, and so on. Alongside this, multiplicity, hybridity, and diversity became the buzzwords (Jain, 2005). Such a world had a corresponding socio-politico-economic framework which came to be called, in the positive light, 'multiculturalism', 'globalization or global village' and derogatively called 'global pillage' by Arif Dirlik, who makes a insightful observation on the nature of this phenomenon, "Corresponding to economic fragmentation...is culture fragmentation or to put it in its positive guise, multiculturalism"(310).

Long back in the hoary past, man began as nomad and now, so to say, the circle having come full, is again ever in quest for greener pastures caring little for the physical and emotional dislocation such a mode of being would inevitably entail. As the people of all cultures are afloat, the ubiquity of multiple cultures has, of necessity, given rise to multicultural societies, and this diversity is, if controversially, described as multiculturalism. But, its semantic possibilities having broadened, the term has come to imply certain attitudes and policies towards this multiplicity (Sudhir Chandra "Self and Multiculturalism") too. And it is these attitudes and policies that manifest different perspectives in different parts of the world. While the western societies formerly encouraged immigration, ostensibly to 'mentor' the backward peoples, but the allurements of material and human resources was ever the real concern. Now they seem to be protectionist in the face of wholesale immigration that affected not only the employability of the natives but also the politics of power insofar as demographic statistics matter. With immigrants, there have spread cultures, ethnicities, religions, cuisines and so much more besides. When there is such a variety, difference and sameness emerge as two major issues, among others, of vital importance. Naturally, one is to make a choice

between the culture of origin or adoption. If one does not take an early call on this, there ensues an ordeal of identity crisis. The very experience is inscribed with excruciating ontological insecurity. One can hardly survive long under such an ordeal. This demands a decision, no matter how much one chooses to shut eyes to it.

The problem felt on the individual level is that of orientation and this renders the diaspora indecisive about their belongingness as they slide ambivalently through the in-between space. The past refuses to go away while the present demands snap of all ties. M.G. Vassanji brings out the predicament in *No New Land*: “We are but creatures of our origins, and however stalwartly we march forward, paving new roads, seeking new worlds, the ghosts from our pasts stand not far behind and are not easily shaken off” (09).

It is this crisis of identity- construction caused by the multicultural mosaic of Canada that Vassanji seeks to bring out. Vassanji, born East African but naturalized Canadian, creates the fictional world that simulates the postcolonial scenario and then leaves the fictive characters react in their own ways to this predicament of being caught between two cultures. Habitually, Vassanji has deep interest in origin of things and their long history that makes them what they are. Along these lines, at the center of all his fictional world is the Asian community, Ismailis, rendered as the fictional community of the Shamsis. How this community first gained the colonizer’s favor in the East Africa and later, how it was forced, after being sandwiched between the colonizer and the colonized, into diasporic existence- a homeless community scattered over the globe. Thence, it takes refuge in Canada that in the beginning beckons immigrants with enticing material prosperity only to disappoint them with a painful realization of discriminatory- racial or otherwise- forces at work. This comes to them as an eye-opener that there is actually no new land. In other words, the discrimination they suffered in East Africa is met with everywhere and Canada is no exception to it what if Canada purports, officially, to be multicultural. So their migrancy has now become a mode of being that has its own enabling and disabling features. Canada is the haven where immigrants abound but not without the realization of ‘otherness’ which is seen indexed in their race, ethnicity or religion.

The novel *No New Land* (1991) has as its main concern the conflict between assimilation and acculturation to mainstream Canadian culture, versus maintaining some kind of racial or cultural integrity brought over from the old land. In Vassanji’s fictional world Canada, at once, becomes El Dorado and the site for cultural dislocation. The evidence is not far to seek, one has enough forebodings to infer that the snow that Nurdin and his family are greeted with is nothing but a metonymy of Otherness: “Snow had fallen, a blistering wind blew, squalls on the road, and as they stepped outside the airport building it maid sail of their ill-fitting second hand clothes....”(35).

The snow symbolizes the coldness typical of secular, metropolis culture that Canadian multicultural set-up accords and promotes. Thus, Nurdin with his family is under the illusion of having discovered a new land where their pasts will never haunt them. As they land in Canada the first thing they miss is the cultural anchorage against the flow of chaos. For this, Dar-e-Salam is transplanted on the soil of Canada in the form of Don Mills where East African immigrants live by their cultural ways. Their cultural peculiarities are retained. But how long can it go like this? Will it not be their ghettoisation? And how long can such cultural outposts be preserved under hostile circumstances? After all, one needs people to

interact with, at least, for change. If this is how Shamsis hope to exist, there is little chance of growth. They must forsake shelters and encounter the alien culture. Neil Bissondath is the stalwart of this attitude, as he writes in *Selling Illusions* (): “Vassanji’s description of this community of exiles-so tight, so self-contained, so alienated from the mainstream- is that of an almost classic ghetto” (110).

Such outposts are safe while one stays indoors but what if they dare venture out? This is what Vassanji leaves ambivalent. To him, it is the individuals choice to make weather he/she, like Jamal (a go-getter character in the novel) chooses to assimilate and goes places or like Ismail turns his back and returns to homeland or like Nurdin keeps suffering the in-between, hyphenated existence which leads him nowhere except to the conclusion that there is now new land, no matter where he turns to in search for it.

On the one hand, Don Mills, as a cultural outpost, gives security from cultural alienation, on the other, it betrays how the ideal cultural mosaic of Canada reverses into vertical mosaic assigning each community a place on the hierarchy of power. The multicultural set-up pretends to have done away with all discriminatory practices but racism(based on the colour of skin) proves a chameleon changing colours to camouflage itself but ever present there at the heart of inter-cultural relation. Esmail is the case in point. One day, he is beaten by some rowdy racists and he, overnight, rises as an artist. This tells how deeply race and politics relate. If one is shown as being victimized, one goes places and becomes somebody from nobody. When Canada has done its worst to him, he returns home and claims the exotic that any ethnic group would be believed to have, and this catapults him as a painter of mask into great fame.

First, Esmail lives in Canada but paints only Tanzania. All his painted masks carry strong assertion of his community at a place where nobody values it. In spite of this, his art functions as a tool of self-assertion and self-preservation because his masks evoke a rare solidarity among all the Shamsis living in Canada. Thus, Canada rejects Esmail for his racial difference but that very difference makes him a millionaire and a cultural icon back home. So difference does the trick in Esmail’s life.

Thus, Esmail’s success is a clear reflection of how fake the multiculturalist claims are! While outwardly, it may make it look as if there is real concern for the immigrants, but deep down, it never lets any attempt at acculturation succeed.

If Esmail triumphs over the politics of identity by claiming his Otherness, there are others who suffer interminably just for the same Otherness. Nurdin is the case in point. His failure to get a job in Canada tells the whole story. Despite having the qualification he is pushed into a catch-22 situation when he is asked to have something that is pre-requisite of itself i.e. Canadian experience for a job in Canada.

Nurdin’s flight from East Africa lands him nowhere. His attempt to get away from discriminatory system is frustrated by the fact that there is no new land. New lands are as much infested with the evils as the ones one left behind. Thus far, it is systemic failure that undoes Nurdin. But, on individual level too, there is experience of physical dislocation. Mentally, he is bound by the knowledge of his past (his father’s worldview) but he has to face the here and now which demands dynamism and the ability to adapt quickly. This is what he tries to do but with no avail, and in the process he loses his self-esteem by doing all that his

old value-system forbade- eats pork; drinks wine; indulges in pornography and is almost drawn on the verge of extra-marital relationship with Sita.

The case of his being accused of attempting to rape a white woman comes as an expose of the deep-seated racial attitudes. The way things unfold shows it amply that the bias is not limited to the perpetrators; rather, it lurks deep in the hearts of the oppressed too. And the backlash to rape betrays how deeply the race as a marker of difference is ingrained in the Western society. This leads them to attribute everything negative to the others, particularly, if it offers them a chance to attack the Eastern sexuality. This tells how crucial difference is in determining the equations of power in inter-cultural affairs. However, a new perspective on this issue is developed by Neil Bissoondath in *Selling Illusions* when he says with desperation, “Is there a moment when one stops being, in the eyes of others, an alien, an exile, an immigrant?” Though, he does not deny the existence of difference yet, to him, its deliberate articulation is “exhibitionistic multiculturalism”(47). For him, the essence of Canadianness lies in the fact that one chooses to belong to Canada. Other concerns are superficial. He rejects that being a Canadian depends on the colour of one’s skin.

Thus, there are two perspectives on the riddle of belongingness and dislocation. One is essentialist and suggests clinging to what one is already. In other words, this view supports the *Being* status of human self while the counter-view is in favor of the ‘*Becoming*’ status. As both the views point to extreme positions, the middle path is a likely solution. Doing this will mean adopting the political-constitutional framework for citizenship, and not the ethno-cultural considerations. For a world poised precariously between the nationalist and globalist politics, the issue of identity for the purpose of citizenship had better be kept within the constitutional parameters only.

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