



Research Paper

Negotiation of Past and Present: M.G.Vassanji's *Amriika*

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Abstract:

The urge to look back into a bygone past and to reclaim that which is lost is inherent in every sensitive human psyche. This sense of loss associated with the past is intensified in an immigrant, who has transported himself from his homeland and settled in an alien land. The past/present dichotomy is felt intensely by an immigrant who is lured by the glamour of an alien land, but still feels nostalgic about the homeland. It is this conflict that gets reflected in an immigrant writer, as he continuously harps on to his homeland in his writings. Ensnared as he is in the migrated land, the immigrant writer tries to come to terms with his past through his writings which draw upon his homeland as the setting. Vassanji's novel *Amriika* (1999) is the typical story of an immigrant who feels lost and adrift in a new land, desperately clinging onto the memories of a past. To be tied down to the past only serves to hinder an immigrant's assimilation and acceptance of the present. Survival of the immigrant demands not an anchoring in the past, but a voyage to the future. However, a complete denial of the past is equally not desirable, because past is very much a criterion of his identity. This necessitates a negotiation of the past/present dichotomy in an immigrant's life. As Vassanji's *Ramji* gauges everything in the present in terms of his past, it makes him a typical immigrant caught between two spaces.

Keywords: immigrant, homeland, migrated land, memory, quest

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The inexorable passage of time is an intriguing phenomenon that man has all along tried to grapple with. The irretrievability of the past, the uncertainty about the present and the unpredictability of the future make the concept of time highly bewildering. Past is a lived experience and hence more concrete than present or future time. It has an aura of certainty which makes it less ambiguous. Hence the urge to look back into a bygone past is inherent in every human consciousness. Besides, man's instinct to reclaim that which is lost makes him harp onto the past. This sense of loss associated with the past is intensified in an immigrant, who has transported himself from his homeland and settled in an alien land. Because, past is a terrain from which he is transported both by the flux of time, and also by the borders of geographical territories. The past, for the immigrant, is not a spent period of time. It simply refuses to pass into the realm of oblivion.

The past/present dichotomy is felt intensely by an immigrant who is lured by the glamour of an alien land, but still feels nostalgic about the homeland. But it is significant that this obsession with the past never concretizes itself into an actual return to his homeland. This is because, the immigrant is aware that he no longer belongs to that past which he has left behind. In the words of the Indo-Canadian writer Arnold Itwaru, "For that land there, that region, lives in us as memory and dream, as nostalgia, romance of reflection, that which defines us as different, that to which we *think* we belong but no longer do" (King 208). It is this conflict that gets reflected in an immigrant writer, who continuously harps on to his homeland in his writings. His writings become the means wherein he tries to come to terms with his past. Having opted to abandon his native land in search of better prospects, the immigrant writer realizes he cannot retrace his steps. The perpetually deferred 'return journey' becomes a constant concern, which he tries to relieve by re-creating his homeland in his writings. – what Rushdie considers as recreating the "lost home in a lost city in the mists of lost time" (*Imaginary Homelands* 9).

"I am not an immigrant who believes that you leave everything behind," writes the South Asian Canadian writer M.G.Vassanji (qtd. in Kanganayagam 130). Writing becomes more a process of self-discovery for him. He specifies, "There was a self-realization that it was not a conscious decision to tell other people as

much as me trying to understand in my mind what was so rapidly being lost. And, of course the more I wrote, the more I realized that there are so many stories that have not yet been told” (qtd. in Smith 29). It is this decision to ‘tell the untold stories’ that leads Vassanji to the unrecorded annals of the history of his community in his literary debut *The Gunny Sack*, which deals with the Asian experience in East Africa over four generations, beginning with Dhanji Govindji’s arrival in Zanzibar in 1885 and extending to the 1980s when his great grandson Salim continues the journey his great grandfather had started.

Vassanji’s novel *Amriika* (1999) is the typical story of an immigrant who feels lost and adrift in a new land, desperately clinging onto the memories of a past. Ramji’s story is set in 1995 – it is twenty-seven years since he had left Dar, as “an individual at last with destiny in his own hands” (*Amriika*123). Vassanji introduces Ramji indulging in his favourite pastime of ruminating over his past. Ramji’s memory takes him back to 1968, when he arrives in the El Dorado called America with its great universities of towering columns and domes where all awesome modern research was being done, the land of wonderful things and great opportunities. But he finds the land far different from the one he had dreamed about. Back in Dar, Ramji got attracted to the charm and mystery of the distant landmass and this won over his resistance to leave his homeland. However his resolution gets shaken when he hears the news about Robert Kennedy’s death. He wonders how a land that failed to protect the life of a great man can offer a haven to aliens like him. But it was Mr Darcy, the firebrand of Dar, who assures him that he has to go, because education is more important than anything else. Thus Ramji sets off to America, along with his friend Sona, with one last look at his grandmother bidding an endless farewell to him. Ramji’s arrival coincides with the three highly charged decades in the nation’s history. What awaits Ramji who joins the Tech is a campus raging with anti-war demonstrations against the American government’s involvement in Vietnam. With the college campus ringing out nothing but cries of peace, Ramji finds himself participating in the protest marches and demonstrations, not for or against America, but simply for an end to the war and America’s shameful, bullying role in it.

Countering the immigrant’s lament that he belongs nowhere, Salman Rushdie asserts that the predicament of a migrant is not in his ‘ontological unbelonging’ but in his excess of ‘belongings’. “It is not that the migrant belongs nowhere, but that he belongs to too many places” (qtd. in Ahmed 127). However, an immigrant like Ramji, who constantly shuttles between the memory of his former home and the loyalty towards the adopted land, strongly feels the lack of a sense of ‘belonging’ – a typical immigrant syndrome. The sentimental value attributed to the homeland and the emotional estrangement with the migrated land makes Ramji feel that he is the ‘exotic other’ – “the man from Africa, an authentic Third Worlder” (*Amriika*57). Even when Ramji gets involved in the thick of activities in America – “Amriika” as his grandmother calls it – he is conscious that he is different. The big question always looms large before Ramji, “Who are you?”. To which he finds an answer – “I am a guy, a simpleton from the town of Dar es Salaam in the African country of Tanzania, belonging to a small Indian community called the Shamsis” (83). But the present is a greater reality for him. And he is forced to redefine himself – “I am an Indian and African and all screwed up with Western education” (115). Ramji realises that the kind of conflict he feels is never experienced by his kids. Without the “hangups of their immigrant parents” (2), they ‘belonged’ in a way none of his generation ever could, here or anywhere else, despite their ardent protestations that they were fully American.

“Home,” Rushdie states, “is the place to which you can always return, no matter how painful the circumstances of your leaving” (*Moor* 209). It is this prospect of return that very often sustains an immigrant who is trapped in the memory of his homeland. As for Ramji, even as he gets more and more involved with the new life, there is only one dream he cherishes along with his friend Sona – “of one day returning to our countries and working in a school or college, of paying back to our country” (*Amriika*82). Ramji never regrets the decision to immigrate to America, because he hopes that he will eventually return to his native land. Stranded in the new land “plucked out from his old life and suspended [. . .] in this silence, in this darkness, in this alien air, with the alien smell of the pillow and feel of the mattress (11), the prospect of return is uppermost in his mind. The *khanga* hung in his room, presented to him by the African women on the eve of his departure, with its Swahili message “Wayfarer, keep looking back”, constantly reminds him of his duty to return. But situation back home is quite depressing to ensure a safe return. Idi Amin has taken steps to expel all Asians from Africa. This gives a moral justification for Ramji to secure the status of a permanent resident in the U.S. and to take up a job at Cambridge Electronics Corporation. Ramji realises that ever since he has set foot on the American soil, he has walked through a portal – a passage way to a state of enchantment. “There was no walking back of course, no undoing of that spell” (122). All that remains are certain “annual guilt-ridden resolutions to go back to Africa, to do my bit for nation-building” (124).

It is Ramji’s attempt to escape from the tormenting memories of the past and the persistent demands of the present that takes him to Satguru Divine Anand Mission. Ramji’s highly sceptical mind does not permit an easy acceptance of the Swami. But before long, Ramji finds himself drawn into the Swami’s charm, not concerned about his genuineness or fakeness. He avoids friends, stops going to the Friday mosque, grows a beard and hair, and in the manner of the Master wears a white cotton *kurta*. He takes yoga classes and attends lectures of theology and Upanishads. He knows that he is at the ashram under false pretenses and merely to

escape from himself. The ashram becomes a total retreat, a quiet hideout, where he lives without commitment to anything or anybody. But even as he wallows in that life, Ramji knows that he cannot lose himself in it entirely. Ramji cannot remain in the world of make-believe for long. His final self-realization – “for me, it’s the mind, not the soul: mine is the world of science and mathematics, reason. I don’t want beatitude, infinite wisdom, and permanent enlightenment” – makes him leave the Ashram. Thus Ramji is brought back to reality. He justifies to Sona, “I just want some space . . . to be. To be left alone from the past, not worry about what I’m called, and what I’m supposed to be . . . I am what I am” (*Amriika*107).

The sense of a ‘lost past’ intensifies an immigrant’s conflict. Analysing this ‘lost feeling’ in an immigrant, Rushdie points out, “It is made more concrete for [an immigrant] by the physical fact of discontinuity, of his present being in a different place from his past, of his being elsewhere” (*Imaginary Homelands* 12). For a man of Ramji’s sensibilities, it is difficult to break off from the past. The very term ‘home’ haunts him. The quivering voice of his grandmother back in Dar singing hymns always echoes in his mind. He keeps writing letters to his grandmother once a week. His obsession with the past is revealed in the game he sometimes plays with himself – he tries to imagine what it’s like back at home ‘now’. But ‘home’ becomes a distant reality for Ramji after the death of his grandmother – “how I wish I had a home to go back to. But you do have a home. It’s just that there’s nobody there. . .” (*Amriika*143). As a recompense, like all other immigrants, Ramji begins to associate himself more with his community members. His frequent visits to Toronto, where a large number of Asians from East Africa had formed a thriving community, is a means of recreating the atmosphere back home. It was at Toronto, that he meets Zuli, the pretty Dar girl, to whom he gets married. By this alliance he feels that he has done justice to his grandmother’s memory. Zuli, with her “back-home interests” and with her passion for Indian films, songs and Indian food makes him feel “[he] was coming home” (127). However it becomes a futile hope, as the marriage breaks up, and Ramji finds himself drawn to Rumina, the young woman from Zanzibar.

“Home away from home’ being a mirage and ‘back to home’ remaining an unfulfilled and even, undesirable dream, home becomes for the immigrant a “mythic place of desire – a place of no return, even if it is possible to visit the geographical territory” (McLeod 209). This leads the immigrant – Rushdie’s “itinerant layabouts” (*Moor* 329) – to a ‘quest for home’. Having lost that geographical territory called ‘home’ it becomes an emotional construct for an immigrant. In Rumina’s company, Ramji creates a new ‘home’ away from home. Ramji’s affair with Rumina is much more than an escape from an unhappy marriage. “With Rumina, he was finally living an existence which he did not feel was alien to him, and so, in a manner of speaking, she had brought him home” (*Amriika*213). Together they try to recreate the lost world. Rumina teaches Swahili and also studies traditional Zanzibari door designs. They cook traditional Zanzibari food and attend Shamsi mosque. Thus, Ramji who drifts about aimlessly finally finds his moorings in his relationship with Rumina. Together they succeed in re-creating the Dar atmosphere in New York, which quells the torments of his guilt-ridden soul.

Ramji takes up the assignment in ‘Inqalab International’ with its monthly journal called *Inqalab* (a political magazine highlighting the cause of the Third world) mainly to make amends for the past – “to assuage a conscience which had never fully recovered from a belief that [he] had betrayed [his] world” (*Amriika*200). But he hardly expects that his attempts to atone for his past will ruin his present for ever. Ramji “haunted by ghosts of faraway places’ (263) takes up Michel’s case for the natural compassion for a compatriot. Mehboob alias Michel, who hails from Dar es Salaam, seeks asylum in ‘Inqalab International’ after getting involved in a book store bomb blast in Michigan – “An appeal from a compatriot, a Community member, we were brought up to believe we are brothers and sisters, we stand by each other” (247). Thus once again, Ramji finds himself harbouring a fugitive, just as twenty-five years ago he gave asylum to Lucy Ann Miller (a member of the Freedom Action Committee against Vietnam War). Lucy, the prime suspect in the Institute of Strategic Studies bomb blast case, was arrested from Ramji’s apartment where she was hiding. Lucy who suspected that Ramji was behind her arrest shouted at his face “You traitor – betrayer of your world” (118). Her allegation still echoes in his mind and it is to make amends that he decides to help Michel – a decision that costs him his life. In his eagerness to save Michel, what he loses is Rumina, who suspects Ramji’s hands behind Michel’s death. When Rumina walks out on him, leaving no word, Ramji is dislodged from the centre of the universe which he has found for himself. As the make-believe world of restaging the past in the present collapses, Ramji is once again left adrift in the new land, having lost all moorings from the past.

Ramji’s search for Rumina symbolizes the immigrant’s quest for his past. Because, what Ramji sees in Rumina is a vision from his past. In her company, he experiences a feeling of security which one feels when ensconced in the warmth of home. Suddenly deprived of her company, he feels absolutely lost. Ramji’s quest for Rumina continues – his quest for the past will never cease. “I feel utterly alone. I have not recovered from my loss, and I harbour a fanatical hope . . . Any moment Rumina will come and pause briefly at the doorway with a smile, and walk in” (*Amriika*128). In all apparitions, he finds her – the woman he has lost. Ramji’s life becomes an eternal wait for Rumina to return.

The negotiation between past and present is inevitable in the life of an immigrant, who is caught between the spaces of his homeland and migrated land – symbolizing his past and his present respectively. To be tied down to the past only serves to hinder his assimilation and acceptance of the present. Survival of the immigrant demands not an anchoring in the past, but a voyage to the future. However, a complete denial of the past is equally not desirable, because past is very much a criterion of his identity as an immigrant. This necessitates a negotiation of the past/present dichotomy in an immigrant's life. When Ramji sets off to America, Darcy has reminded him to come back. "That is your duty to your country, to your people" (*Amriika*207) – an obligation which he could never pay off. This sense of "failed patriotism" makes him feel guilty and he uses every opportunity to assuage his guilt. He gauges everything in the present in terms of his past. He gives asylum to Lucy Miller because she claims herself to be a champion of the Third World. He considers his marriage with Zuli as a tribute to the memory of his grandmother. The friendship with Rumina is cherished, because she re-incarnates his past. The greatest tragedy in his life is precipitated in the refuge he offers to Michel, just because the latter is his compatriot. Thus it turns out that in Ramji's life, each calamity in the present leads to a severance with the past. Without being able to retain his link with the past, Ramji's feels adrift. Hence he has to "chase shadows of vanished omens for meaning" (1), as symbolized in his quest for Rumina. As Ramji sets himself to write a memoir which alone will save his soul from endless torments, he becomes an alter-ego of his creator who continually draws upon his homeland for his writings. Vassanji's writings are an attempt to write about his past before it fades into oblivion in order to "find out why you were what you were, what happened to you [. . .] what happened during the last hundred years" (qtd. in Daurio 200). Like Ramji, Vassanji also believes that "to imagine beginnings" is "to sustain them and guide them to [his] present" (*Amriika*2).

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