



Postmemory, Existential Precarity and Diasporic Experiences in M.G. Vassanji's *The Book of Secrets*

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ABSTRACT

M.G. Vassanji's novel *The Book of Secrets* (1994) intricately interweaves the themes of postmemory, existential precarity and diasporic experiences against the backdrop of colonial and postcolonial East Africa. The narrative focalization is concentrated on the British colonial administrator Alfred Corbin's diary, discovered and interpreted by the retired teacher Pius Fernandes. The novel traces how historical traumas from the colonial era reverberate across generations shaping identities in diaspora. The diary records the Asian settlements in East Africa. Postmemory, as coined by Marianne Hirsch, manifests in the characters' mediated engagements with past events they did not directly witness, such as the impacts of World War I and interracial entanglements. Existential precarity emerges in the unsteady sense of belonging faced by the Shamsi community-Indian Muslims undergoing racial hierarchies, migrations and cultural hybridity. Diasporic experiences highlight the fluidity of identity in 'contact zones' where migration, adaptation, alienation and reinvention collide. The study attempts to employ postcolonial literary analysis drawing on theories from Homi Bhabha, Hirsch and Judith Butler to examine how Vassanji's narrative challenges fixed notions of history and selfhood. By analyzing key characters like Mariamu, Nurmohammed Pipa and Ali, the discussion traces the novel's portrayal of fragmented memories and precarious existences as emblematic of broader diasporic struggles.



The novel sheds penetrating insights on the personal lives, plights and the experiences of the expatriates who are destined to live lives as precariats as they were subject to racial discrimination, cultural tensions and political upheavals. This study aims to contribute to understanding how South Asian diasporic literature re-imagines colonial legacies in multicultural contexts.

Introduction

The contemporary world has seen massive waves of migration worldwide. People are driven to leave their homelands due to economic opportunities, prospects for improved jobs, access to advanced education, desires for a more refined lifestyle and devastating natural disasters. These movements have given rise to substantial diasporic communities in numerous nations. Postcolonial literature frequently explores the lives and trajectories of these expatriates. The storytelling in such works often centers on themes like identity struggles, the challenges of diasporic journey and adaptation, feelings of uprootedness and estrangement, loneliness and disconnection, longing for the past, clashes between cultures, experiences of exile, cultural blending and hybrid identities, interactions across diverse backgrounds, processes of assimilation and issues of racial tension. The notable literary works such as Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*, Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*, Meera Syal's *Anita and Me* and M.G. Vassanji's *The Book of Secrets* masterfully address these concerns. Similarly, V.S. Naipaul's *The Mimic Men*, Samuel Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners*, Buchi Emecheta's *Second-Class Citizen*, Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace* and *The Hungry Tide* delve deeply into topics related to migration, crises of selfhood, alienation and exile.

'Diaspora' specifies a scattered population or community originating from one specific geographic location, now spread out and living in multiple distant lands separate from their place of origin. John Hartley defines diaspora as "heterogeneous cultures, spatially separated from their place of origin yet living between place in their identity and cultural life." (Hartley, 2004) The stress on in-betweenness has been brashly put forth by Salman Rushdie in his *Imaginary Homelands*, "Sometimes we feel that we straddle two cultures; at other times, that we fall between two stools." (Rushdie, 1992) Diaspora emerges primarily due to voluntary immigration, forced displacement (due to war, natural catastrophe) and forces of colonization and imperialistic conquest, enslavement etc. While living abroad, diaspora community keeps in touch with their country of origin typically preserving and celebrating the cultural practices, rites, age-old traditional values and ideals of their root country. Living lives as



expatriates in the adopted homelands, they nurture emotional attachment, nostalgic feelings for their root country with an incessant urge to return to their homelands. The members of the forced diaspora generally experience oppression, trauma, bereavement, persecution, subjugation and rootlessness. Pertaining to the traits of diaspora members, William Safren comments that they “retain a collective memory, vision and myth about their original homeland. At the same time they regard their ancestral homeland as their true, ideal home and as the place to which they or their descendants would (or should) return when conditions are appropriate.” (qtd. in Nandan, 1996) The descendants of the diaspora community also develop their own culture which is built on their ancestral lineage, but they incorporate a lot of assimilation and acculturation with the culture of the host country. The fact is evident in *The Namesake* and *The Book of Secrets*. According to Bill Ashcroft, “The development of diasporic cultures necessarily questions essentialist models, interrogating the ideology of a unified “natural’ cultural norm, one that under-pins the centre/margin model of colonialist discourse.” (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin 2004)

M.G. Vassanji’s *The Book Secrets* is a fascinating and subtle postcolonial work that recounts the immigration and exile of Asians in East Africa. It foregrounds the themes of immigration, exile, displacement, struggle for identity and cross-cultural interactions and conflicts. The story revolves round a cast of characters who are part of Asian community in East Africa, whose lives and predicaments form the core of the narrative spanning over seven decades. The novel sheds penetrating insights into the personal lives, plights and belief system of the expatriates who are part of African Indian society. It relates memory and history as Vassanji skillfully interweaves the past with the present. Using the stream of consciousness technique, the novel enquires into the ideas of home and community as they extend over time and space. The novelist also investigates into the issues pertaining to the notions of belongingness, identity, ethnicity and nostalgia.

The narrative of the novel can be analyzed through lens of critical concepts like postmemory, existential precarity and diaspora. Postmemory, as defined by Marianne Hirsch, refers to the inherited memories of traumatic events experienced by previous generations, often mediated through artifacts like photographs or memories or, in this case, a diary. In *The Book of Secrets*, the characters grapple with colonial trauma, racial violence, displacement and cultural erasure that they inherit indirectly shaping their present identities. Existential precarity, drawing from Judith Butler’s notions of vulnerability and unstable social existence, captures the characters’ perpetual insecurity in a world of shifting borders and allegiances. Diasporic experiences, informed by Stuart Hall’s ideas of hybridity and Homi Bhabha’s ‘third space,’ illustrate the ongoing negotiation of identity in multicultural context. Vassanji employs these themes to portray diaspora not as a static condition of loss but as a dynamic process of reconstruction



amid uncertainty. Through Pius's compulsive decoding of the diary, the novel reveals how postmemory perpetuates existential precarity compelling diasporic subjects to forge hybrid identities in the face of incomplete histories.

Methodology

This paper adopts a qualitative literary analysis approach grounded in postcolonial theory to examine *The Book of Secrets*. The primary data has been derived from close textual reading of the novel focusing on narrative structure, character development and symbolic elements like the diary. The secondary sources include scholarly articles on Vassanji's work, diaspora studies and related theories. The theoretical frameworks like Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory steers the analysis of intergenerational transmission of trauma, Judith Butler's theory of precarity informs discussions of existential vulnerability particularly in diasporic contexts where social and ontological insecurity prevail. For diasporic experiences, Stuart Hall's articulation of cultural identity as positional and hybrid and Homi Bhabha's 'hybridity' and 'third space' provide lenses to explore identity formation in contact zones. The methodology involves thematic coding identifying passages related to postmemory, precarity and diaspora, then cross-referencing with historical contexts like colonial East Africa and Indian migration.

Discussion

Postmemory in *The Book of Secrets* gets manifested as the second and third generations' vicarious engagement with colonial traumas mediated through the diary as a familial object. Hirsch describes postmemory as "the relationship that the 'generation after' bears to the personal, collective and cultural trauma of those who came before- to experiences they 'remember' only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up." (Hirsch, 2012) In Vassanji's novel, Pius Fernandes embodies the fact as he deciphers Corbin's diary reconstructing events from 1913 that involve racial tensions, war and personal betrayals. The diary itself symbolizes fragmented postmemory. Discovered in an abandoned shop, it contains unfinished entries about Corbin's obsession with Mariamu, her alleged possession by a spirit and the ensuing scandal that questions her virginity and Ali's paternity. Pius, who never witnessed these events, becomes haunted by them: "The past is a jumble of facts and feelings, images and sounds... It comes to you in fragments." (Vassanji, 1994) His obsession mirrors how postmemory operates through imagination, filling gaps with speculation. For instance, Pius imagines Mariamu's rape and murder during World War I, a trauma echoing colonial violence against women which he inherits as a diasporic Indian in postcolonial Tanzania.



Ali, Mariamu's son, further illustrates facets of postmemory. Raised amidst whispers of his ambiguous heritage- fair skin and grey eyes suggesting European paternity-he flees to London eloping with Rita. Yet, the diary's secrets pursue him as Rita later retrieves it to shield his identity. This intergenerational transmission of memory highlights how colonial intimacies (like Corbin-Mariamamu) produce lasting psychic wounds, perpetuating a sense of disconnection. Vassanji critiques how postmemory often remains unresolved, as Pius relinquishes the diary without full revelation underscoring the limits of historical recovery. Moreover, the novel's non-linear structure, jumping between 1913, the 1950s and 1988, mimics the disjointed nature of remembered trauma, aligning with Hirsch's idea that postmemory is 'more indirect and displaced' than direct memory.

Existential precarity in the novel arises from the fragile ontological and social positions of the characters in a colonial-diasporic landscape. Drawing from Judith Butler, precarity denotes a "politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence and death." (Butler,2004). For the Shamsi community, it is manifested in racial hierarchies that position them between European colonizers and African indigenes rendering their existence perpetually insecure. Pipa epitomizes the aspects of precarity. As a humble shopkeeper, he marries Mariamu after her entanglement with Corbin only to face community ostracism over her purity. His life unravels during the war, serving as a double agent, he returns to find Mariamu murdered, her body violated- a metaphor for colonial exploitation. Pipa's subsequent obsession with the diary which he cannot read, symbolizes his existential limbo, "He was a man without a past, without anchors." (Vassanji,1994). His shrine to Mariamu reflects a desperate grasp for stability amid loss highlighting how precarity erodes selfhood.

As an immigrant in Tanzania, Pius feels 'essentially homeless.' (Vassanji ,1994) His infatuation with Rita and solitary life underscore personal vulnerabilities compounded by historical shifts like Africanization policies that marginalize Asians. Vassanji portrays precarity not as mere economic hardship but also as existential dilemma. In broader terms, the novel links precarity to colonial legacies. The Shamsis' 'in-between' status- neither fully African nor Indian-exposes them to violence as seen in wartime arrests and postwar expulsions. This aligns with Butler's view that precarity is relational, dependent on power structures that deem certain lives 'grievable.'

In *The Book of Secrets*, the characters are subject to identity crisis due the history of multiple migrations which make them feel alienated and isolated from their homelands. Like other novels dealing with diaspora, *The Book of secrets* also portrays the characters whose identities become enigmatic, suffer



from identity crisis and nurture strong urges to return to places of origin. The colonial history of Kenya and Tanzania functions as the backdrop of the novel. With the changing political scenario and arrival of war, Kenya went under the control of Britain and Tanzania was ruled by Germany. The people residing in these two territories feel arbitrariness of boundaries on their lives and customs making their lives precarious. The characters in the novel bear heterogeneous cultural affiliations, yet Vassanji dexterously employs cross-cultural empathy, cross-cultural marriage and breeding, acculturation and assimilation against the racial differences. The narrative deconstructs the very notion of borders and compartment alienations where the identities of characters are placed in enigmatic labyrinths.

The story of *The Book of Secrets* is partly fictional and partly based on memory that reveals the experiences of the expatriates. It is a narrative of interaction between the Shamsi community, who left India for East Africa in search of fate and the native Africans as well as the colonial rulers. The novelist underlines the history of migration of Asian community to Kikono during the colonial rule. The novel provides a convincing tale of the fates and lives of large mass of exiles who witness socio-political change, ethnic and racial tensions, colonial occupations where their community lives were also got affected. The novel is a spell-binding narrative of the lives and predicaments of generations of diasporic population and sweep of history where the novelists tries to display how the human beings come to terms with the vicissitudes of life when they live in exile away from their homelands and places of origin. The novelist develops Pipa's character as a true figure of diaspora population in East Africa. His experiences bear the testimony of immigrants' experiences and are typical of the members of the same clan who share the similar sense of alienation, racial, cultural tensions, conflicts and urge for solidarity. The novelist delves deep into the personal, psychological and emotional sides of immigrants' experiences in their adopted homeland mainly through the character of the protagonist Pipa. He is presented as a colonial subject caught in the web of vicissitudes of life and he is symbolic of the various discourses pertaining to immigrancy, marginality, diasporality, submissiveness to authoritative colonial power agencies and dispossession. At the same time, he represents the plight of the colonized and their relation with the colonizers. He is an individual character and at the same time stereotypical of the Asian African migrants who exposes Vassanji's diasporic articulation.

The narrator of *The Book of Secrets* depicts how the Asians in East Africa always suffered from a sense of rootlessness and precariousness. They were subject to racial discrimination and always occupied insecure position. They were destined to live as precariats in their host land though they lived there for centuries. But with the advent of nationalism in the wake of Tanzania's socialist phase, the fates of the Asians in East Africa deteriorated almost to untenable. Due to the sickening socio-political upheavals,



many members of the Shamsi community were compelled to migrate once more. The multiple migration and displacement make the characters feel alienated, unsafe and rootless. All the major characters in the novel experience the pangs of dislocation and migration at least once. Pipa, the character around whom the story revolves, was born in Moshi, but had to move between Moshi, Kikono, Der Es Salaam and Tanga. Though born in East Africa, his alien origin makes him impossible to belong to Africa. Pipa, like the other members of his community always found himself in portentous nexus between political discourse and identity formation. He had to migrate multiple times in order to escape insecurity, poverty and precarity. Due to his dislocation from one place to another, Pipa faced a lot of challenges. The foremost dilemma that he faced is that he feels the need to belong, the need to identify himself with a certain place and with certain people. The trauma that haunted Pipa the most was his inability to belong. His fortune makes the toughness of diasporic origin quite clear. His plight is indicative of the reckless condition of the Asian Africans who were uprooted from their habitats making them feel isolated, estranged and deprived inviting questions over their identity, belongingness and existence. This is a crucial point in Vassanji's fictional narratives. He intends to point out that the Asian African migrants tried their level best to segregate themselves from the state of unhomeliness, deprivation, denial of equality and liberty, but in vain. The narrative makes it distinct that the journeys undertaken by the migrants in search of identity, belonging and home in foreign countries is normally thwarted and foiled by challenges and doubts.

Memory and nostalgia are the integral features of diasporic fiction which is also evident in *The Book of Secrets*. In the novel, the diaspora population stay attached to their roots though their lives were tainted by questions of dubious identity. The members of Shamsi community continue their fraternity and bonding through their collective memory. In the novel, memory serves as a negotiating tool between the colonial and postcolonial history of East Africa that underscore its ambivalences and contradictions. The novelist inter-mingles history and memory in the narrative of the events. The novelist traces the history of imperialism and colonization over the colonies in Africa, relation between the colonizers and the colonized, the world Wars and their impact on the expatriates of the Indian diaspora in East Africa and the final decolonization of African countries including Tanzania, Kenya and other nations.

Conclusion

In *The Book of Secrets*, M.G. Vassanji masterfully interlaces postmemory, existential precarity and diasporic experiences to depict the enduring impacts of colonialism on hybrid identities. Through Pius's engagement with the diary, postmemory reveals how inherited traumas shape present realities though



often incompletely. Existential precarity underscores the vulnerability of diasporic lives, as characters like Pipa and Pius navigate instability without anchors. Diasporic experiences exposes hybridity in contact zones transforming alienation into adaptive strength. The novel is a masterpiece of postcolonial literature for its portrayal of immigration, alienation, isolation, racial discriminations, cultural tensions, past history, colonization of African nations and subsequent decolonization and relation between the whites and non-whites. This thematic convergence highlights Vassanji's broader design- reclaiming East African Asian histories from marginalization, challenging monolithic narratives of empire. The novel's open-endedness-secrets remain withheld- mirrors real diasporic ambiguities inviting readers to reflect on their own inheritances.

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