



**ENGLISH NOT 'LIKE THE ENGLISH': MAPPING THE NARRATIVE STYLE OF M. G. VASSANJI'S NOVELS, ESPECIALLY, *THE GUNNY SACK*, *THE IN-BETWEEN WORLD OF VIKRAM LALL* AND *THE ASSASSIN'S SONG***

**ARUP CHANDRA DAS**

UGC NET Qualified (2011)

Assistant Teacher, Margram High School

Margram, Murshidabad, W.B



**ARUP CHANDRA DAS**

**ABSTRACT**

Raja Rao clarifies in *Kanthapura*: English is 'the language of our intellectual make-up - like Sanskrit or Persian was before- but not of our emotional make-up'. 'We cannot write like the English. We should not, we cannot write only as Indians.' (Rao 1989) The present paper is an attempt to seek how the dilemmic diasporic experiences of M. G. Vassanji have given a new shape to the linguistic structure of his novels. Less attention is paid to the stylistic features rather than the thematic issues in his novels. The narrative style correlates to his realization that purely foreign language would thwart the spontaneity of his native feelings and diasporic thoughts and nuances. He often fails to communicate his experiences of beliefs, customs and traditions of the East African Asian community. Therefore, he adopts a native approach to the linguistic expression of his experiences. Three of his novels namely *The Gunny Sack* (1989), *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall* (2003) and *The Assassin's Song* (2007) will be reviewed to enucleate how the novelist aptly puts forward his notion of hybridity, diversity, ambivalence, native feelings, and multiple cultures by means of his creativity in nativising the linguistic features and giving them a 'local color'.

Keywords: Bildungsroman, Decolonization, Onomatopoeia, Memoir, Peripherism, Code-switching etc.

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**INTRODUCTION**

Moyez G. Vassanji, an Ismaili Muslim of Gujarati heritage, was born in Nairobi, brought up in Tanzania and went to the United States for higher studies. His family belonged to the community of Indians (Gujarati) who later on emigrated to Africa. He writes novels about the Indians of East Africa who as the time passes pass through a second migration to Canada or the US. He has published seven novels in all namely *The Gunny Sack* (1989),

*No New Land* (1991), *The Book of Secrets* (1994), *Amriika* (1999), *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall* (2003), *The Assassin's Song* (2007) and *The Magic of Saida* (2012). In all the novels, Vassanji primarily focuses on the double migration affecting the lives and identities of the characters making them rather hybrid and multicultural. Here he intends to 'indegeneise' (Zabus 1991) the colonial European English by means of decolonising its hierarchy to establish a hybrid sort of language. By using English

mixed with African and Indian languages, Vassanji subverts the dominance of Western colonial discourse over African traditional discourse.

#### History and memory

Vassanji opines – “in my work the present is always interacting with the past.” Harish Narang states: ‘history fascinates Vassanji’ (2002), meaning that personal and communal histories, the colonial history of Kenya and Tanzania have become the backdrops of Vassanji’s novels. *The Gunny Sack* written in the form of a memoir speaks of the trials and tribulations of the Gujarati migrants of East Africa. It is polyphonic in nature with lots of characters being mouthpieces of many narratives. Salim Juma, the protagonist, inherits an ancient gunny sack (a metaphor for memory) – ‘the clutter of memory that eventually finds its way into a... gunny sack.’(Vassanji 146) He discovers the past lives and betrayals of his great grandfather, Dhanji Govindji and the dark history of the immigrant family in East Africa. The novel reveals a tumultuous history with mixed cultures.

*The In-Between World of Vikram Lall* is a story about revolution and corruption in the making of Kenya. It accounts not only of Kenya’s colonial past but also the postcolonial present full of turmoil caused by the intersection of the whites, Africans and Indians. Vikram Lall, the narrator, falls in love with Kenya knowing its past as a ‘world of repressive, undignified subjecthood.’(Vassanji 5) The book is about Vikram’s political survival as his consequent development as a middleman, a moneychanger, a fixer and a man of ‘power and corruption’ (Vassanji 358) to ensure his place in neo-colonial Kenya.

*The Assassin’s Song* tells the story of Nur Fazal, a mysterious 13<sup>th</sup> century Sufi saint. Vassanji makes the Sufi’s *bol*, a secret mantra, the key to his narrative through which he unveils a long history spanning from AD 1260 to August 2002. The text almost entirely set in India deals with the Muslims of Gujarat. The story speaks of 13<sup>th</sup> century India taking the readers to the US of the 1960s and Canada of the 1980s and moving back to Gujarat in 2002 with the brutal Hindu Muslim riot. The novel, a kind of bildungsroman (a novel about the psychological and moral development of the main character), gives us

knowledge about Karsan’s childhood, his development as a young boy, his being accepted by Harvard University in the US, his falling in love with Marge and moving to British Columbia as an academic.

#### Language in postcolonial era

In the postcolonial era the diasporic writers have designed their language and discourse in a new shape. Derek Walcott quotes: “the English language is nobody’s special property. It is the property of the imagination.” (1996) He intends to imply the diversity of language brought out by the writer’s innovation and creativity. According to Parasher, English ‘has blended itself with cultural and social complex of the subcontinent over the years.’(1990) In line with the prominent Indian English novelists like Anita Desai, Salman Rushdie, Raja Rao, M. G. Vassanji as an East African Asian novelist undertakes a significant change in his use of English by inserting or rather borrowing non-English terms, phrases and sentences to enrich his notion of hybridity in linguistic experiments. Nostalgia, alienation, cultural clashes, immigration, racial discriminations – these are the fascinating factors in his novels. These fields are made vigorous by the use of metaphorical expressions, imagery, Indian words, Hindi expressions, capitals etc. He takes recourse to Swahili words, phrases and sentences to capture the spirit of African culture.

#### Decolonization of language

Vassanji does never follow the strictness and limitations of official English or ‘Standard English’. By destroying ‘the natural rhythms of the English language’ and dislocating ‘the English and let other things into it’ (Chatterjee 2004), he even decolonises the Queen’s English, the English of the ‘centre’ to make his texts suitable to relish for the East African Asian readers. He decolonizes English having in mind the peripherist view of language. Peripherism is ‘the ideology or view of those groups that have historically been linguistically subalternized or disenfranchised but that have now, due to the market forces of globalization, gained access to linguistic capital.’(Vaish 2005) English in the Third World countries is an agent of decolonization enabling the discriminated mind come out of the narrow boundaries of British

English. It has allowed the indigenous writers like Vassanji to write independently with their local flavour and native manifestations.

#### Code switching

Code switching is the process of alternating between more than one linguistic variety. Amitabh Ghosh, Arundhati Roy, Manju Kapur and Arun Joshi use in their novels code mixing as a way to express their themes authentically and realistically. As a multi-cultural personality, the author has incorporated code switching or code mixing as a leading measure of his stylistic experiments. Vassanji's works have been translated into various languages like Spanish, Turkish, French, Dutch, Hindi, Japanese, Italian, Swahili etc. According to Paul Bandia, "the most common form of code switching and code mixing used by the African writers is changing between vernacular languages and the European language. When African writers cannot adequately express African socio-cultural reality in a European language, they resort to the use of indigenous words and expressions." (1996) Chinua Achebe expresses his concern about his failure in expressing his African experience through the use of pure English. He prefers a new variety of English – 'still in communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit its new surroundings.' (1965, 62) Vassanji has extensively used native words and expressions to substantiate the characters' authentic ethnicity and cultural stand.

The narrative is not purely foreign nor does it gain absolute native authenticity. It rather remains dangling between the centre and the periphery, the official and unofficial, the foreign and vernacular. Amin Malak cites: 'the immigrant imagination is dichotomous by nature, locked on the horns of a dilemma, neither affiliated with the old root culture, nor fully fitting with the new adopted one. Accordingly, writers negotiating and articulating such an experience have to inhabit an alternative world, a third world: a world of their imagination, their memory, their nostalgia.' (52) Paul Bandia reflects: "there is a blending of indigenous and western discourses resulting in an other code, a third code, which is hybrid in nature, a code *metis* (mixed) which is neither completely detached from its African nor its European sources." (Bandia 6) The

process of decolonising English gives birth to hybridity emerging out of resistance. The code mixing and code switching develop a kind of hybrid narrative or counter narrative - "hybrid narratives are a bit of a misnomer: we create a narrative and then hybridize it with something that counters or is unlike that narrative" (Larson 210)

According to Brathwaite, the language that the displaced Africans use 'may be in English; but often it is an English which is like a howl or a should or a machine gun or the wind or the wave. It is also like the blues. And sometimes it is English and African at the same time.' (6) Chinua Achebe in a speech entitled "the African Writer and the English Language" questions: "is it right that a man should abandon his mother tongue for someone else's. It looks like a dreadful betrayal and produces a guilty feeling" (Achebe 1975:59) Purity of English language is thwarted by the admixture of Hindi, Swahili and other Indian languages. In *A House for Mr. Biswas* (1961), V.S Naipual presents an intermingled language consisting of creolised English, Hindi and Spanish languages. Brathwaite in his book *History of the Voice* (1984) calls this type of mixed language 'National Language' which does not belong to a particular community. Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* (1935), Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006), Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* – all these are replete with hybrid languages to satisfy the Indian beliefs, values, ethics and socio-cultural lives. Leopold Senghor, a Senegalese poet, adapts French to express his African reality. Ngugi wa Thiong'o, a Kenyan writer, attempts to write only in his native kikuyu. Wole Soyinka, a Nigerian playwright, translated Fagunwa's writing in his native Yoruba.

Vassanji is no exception, and in *The Gunny Sack* he has employed for the sake of his praxis in stylistic approach non-English words basically Swahili terms or Cutchi-Gujarati expressions. The text 'mingles the Indian-Gujarati strains with the Zanzibari-Kenyan-Tanzanian elements of African origin.' (Bandia 1996) In the 'Author's note', Vassanji has confessed that he has taken liberties with language using Swahili for Kiswahili. For pluralising the Swahili words into English he has used plural forms such as *Mshenzis* (a South African choral group), *Mdachis* etc. In an interview with Reynolds,

Vassanji confesses: "I use Swahili-like inflexions for Swahili dialogue; sometimes I insert something completely in Swahili." (2013) It was the language of communication in German East Africa.

Vassanji puts a candid translation for each of the Swahili words into English to imply that he still retains his ties with the native African language though he has migrated to Canada or the US. He has also added a glossary of the Swahili terms translating them into English at the end of most of his books. Before beginning his novel *The Gunny Sack*, he writes the following lines giving their translation below:

'enga taa katika pepo  
haiziwiliki izimikapo sasa mi  
huano izimishiyo'

'Behold the lantern in the wind  
now beyond help  
you see it extinguished'

Swahili words used in the book are: *dengu* (dal), *upesi* (quickly), *mdachis* (German person), *kanzu* (long garment), *mchawi* (magician), *maji* (water), *mhogo* (cassava), *kweli* (true), *mpwapwa* (a market town in Tanzania), *mswaki* (toothbrush), *khamisa ishrin* (25 strokes of a whip), *mwangu* (my son), *mzizimaam* (old man), *mnazi* (settlement in Kenya), *makonde* (member of a Bantu people living in Tanzania), *ungula* (a claw), *uhuru* (freedom), *mwalimu* (Kenyan politician), *afande* (officer), *askari* (policeman), *baraza* (meeting), *basi* (enough), *bwana* (sir), *duka* (shop), *hanisi* (impotent), *haraka* (quick), *jamani* (folks), *jambo* (how are you), *jembe* (spade), *karibu* (welcome), *kikapu* (basket), *kinate* (belly), *kofi* (a beating), *kuni* (firewood), *machela* (a litter), *ndizi* (banana), *njo* (come), *pisha* (move), *sana* (very), *samba* (lion), *tembo* (elephant), *tena* (again), *wako* (yours) etc. Vassanji makes use of some Swahili expressions that are: "Kuna ajabu linatokelea hapo" (there is wonder in that place), "mgeni siku ya kwanza" (the first day for guest), "dumbe dumbe daria" (dear babu), 'weh Zuli mbona umerudi so late-late, basi?', "chou-en-Lai" (Chinese communist leader). People wearing khanga shirts sing: "Ee TANU ya jenga nehi".

Indian expressions are not even avoided. We find such Indian English dialects, to say, pidgins

like "Are baba" (greeting), "shaytaan" (devilish character), "badmaash" (roguish), "Haram Zadah" (a curse), "Jai Mata Di" (Hindi slogan). While men returned from Zanzibar cries are heard: "Africa se aya hai! Africa se aya hai!" (has returned from Africa)

Karsan Dargawalla, in *The Assassin's Song*, narrates through the first person narrative, his own tale after the calamity from Shimla. The narrative flits back and forth in time, memory and space. Through the stream of consciousness technique (where a person's thoughts and conscious reactions are perceived as a continuous flow), the narrator remembers his childhood and adolescence and retrieves the past with nostalgic tone. The framed portrait of his father symbolises the past.

Here the non-English words, basically Indian words, are necessarily italicized to denote their foreignness. These words are *Atman* (inner self of a person), *bhajan* (a devotional song), *bol* (mantra), *Brahman* (Universal Soul), *Brahmin* (member of priestly caste), *chaddar* (a decorated cloth as an offering at a shrine), *dargah* (a holy shrine), *ginan* (a devotional song or hymn), *jain* (member of an Indian religious faith), *Mahabharat* (Indian epic), *namaz* (Muslim prayer), *pir* (a Muslim holy man), *Prasad* (offering from a temple), *puja* (act of devotion), *sufi* (a Muslim mystic), *kaatil* (killer), *Chachi* (aunt), *jadoo* (magic), *Kali Yuga* (the Dark Age), *chhokra* (a young boy), *jigri-dost* (best friend), *beta* (son), *mati* (wish), *angada* (ornament), *dikro* (Gujarati word meaning son) etc. Vassanji has adopted several *ginans* where there is mixture of Indian languages rather archaic.

The narrative abounds in non-English lexical items, basically Gujarati and Hindi, for example, "mane chaakar rakho-ji" (a type of Hindi devotional song), "anand anand kariyo rikhisaro" (be happy, great souls, you have the guru), "khub kiriket khela, nai?" (have you not played cricket too much?), "sasrikal ji" (a greeting in Punjabi), "Raja Singh, tumhara ghar kahan hai?" (Raja Singh, where is your home?), "tum idhar nahin ayega phir?" (do not come again here), "arre Kaniya, tari Angrezi keri sari" (Punjabi song), "tum tariye taranahaar", "salaam alaykum, bhai" (Muslim greeting), "E to amaro varaj chhai" (this is my boy), "chi-chi-chi" (expressing

disgust), “taiyar chhie”(ready), “larkeon ko pasand karte hai” (love the girls), “hare fuliya sohi karamave” etc.

In *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall*, Vikram confesses: “we spoke in English and a bit of Hindi, though I was learning some Gujarati and Cutchi.”(Vassanji 195) Here Vassanji borrows such Indian words as *dadaji* (grandfather), *dadi* (grandmother), *daityas* (devils), *bhaiya* (elder brother), *namaste* (a greeting); expressions such as “kem-che” (how are you), “achha, mein jaunga” (ok, I shall go), “jao, jao, kambakht!” (go, go, unfortunate!), “arre, paagal” (you, mad), “soyi ho na” (are you sleeping), “is se ishq kehete hai” (this is called love), “Heer ki tarah nikli, hamari beti”(our daughter has appeared as Heer) followed by other Swahili expressions such as: “nyinyi wahinidi wenge adabu, kwa kweli, lakini” (you Indians are brought up well but a letter is not the way), “che sera sera” (never on Sunday), “ukiwa na udhia, penyeza rupia” (when in trouble, offer a dollar), “po pote niendapo anifuata”(wherever I go he follows me). Mahesh uncle mutters in Punjabi some abusive words – “badmaash sale... kamine... neech... kambakht log... bastards.” (33) Some delicious food items like *kheer*, *karhi*, *dahi wada* etc are also mentioned in the text.

#### Allegories and allusions

‘From man’s blood-sodden hearts are  
sprung

Those branches of the night and day  
Where the gaudy moon is hung  
What’s the meaning of all song?

‘Let all things pass away.’(Yeats 1932)

The epigraph quoted from W. B. Yeats’s *Vacillation* in *The Gunny Sack* symbolizes the lamentation, frustrations and inner turmoil occurring from some loss in the past and the resulting suggestion of the poet not to shed tears for the past. Past is past and that should be forgotten to enjoy the fresh lights of the present. In *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall*, Vassanji has borrowed some famous quotations such as “who is the third who walks always beside you?” from T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* and “Neti, Neti” (Not this, not that) from *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*. There is the use of Biblical allusions – ‘Isaac did not matter’ (TAS 102). Karsan identifies himself as the son of his father resembled to

Abraham, the Patriarch. The story of Nur Fazal is allusively inspired by the story of Nur Satgur. There is reference to the mystics Kabir, Nanak, Dadu, Mira along with Shakespeare. Mythological reference to the *Mahabharata* with the five Pandava brothers is also mentioned. Huseni’s first son is compared to ‘Bhima’ of the great epic. There are also references to god Vishnu, Allah, the dark Krishna etc.

#### Other features

Onomatopoeia, an interesting feature in stylistics is put forth to make the narrative more lively and interesting. We hear the sound of feet outside: ‘clip clop, clip clop, clip-clip-clop, clip-clop, clip clop, clip-clip-clip, clip clop’ (TAS 7). There is variance in the intensity of tone in the strategy of hyphenation and non-hyphenation. Sometimes the writer creates the background atmosphere apt and ready for the actions get happen: ‘the night was starry, and a cool wind rustled the leaves of the mango and the almond trees.’(8)

There is the use of long hyphenated sentences such as this: “I-promise-to-do-my-best-to-do-my-duty-to-God-and-the-Queen: to-help-other-people-at-all-times...” (TGS 131) Vassanji’s prose has an epistolary touch as there is the use of letters as a part of communication across countries. We find Sona’s first letter to Kala from London, a letter from Amina and Sona’s second letter to Kala. (TGS) Karsan receives some letters from his father instructing him not to forget his mission in life. He even sends a letter to his father deciding to live life with personal fulfilment. (TAS)

#### Conclusion

‘Style is the man’ (Knowles 2006) - the proverbial saying, early twentieth century, reflects that stylistic strategies are congruent to the originality, individuality and inner sensibilities of a writer. Language contact, code mixing, and borrowings – these are the reflections of Vassanji’s own authentic experiences of migration, alienation, nostalgia and displacement. A language reflects both the society and its culture. Naturally, a society which is hybrid or multicultural is sure to be bilingual or multilingual. People in East African Asian society not only use their native languages but also recourse to Indian and foreign ones. Vassanji destroys the purity of Standard or British English for the sake of

authentically representing the migrant experiences of the society he speaks of. Franz Fanon claims: "if the colonized intellectual unabashedly immersed himself in western culture, it is because he had no choice, it was for him an "obligation historique."(Fanon 1969) Vassanji bridges the gap between European culture or language and indigenous writings by resisting the structures of dominance embedded in the colonial language. The basic linguistic distance between the writer and the readers is wiped out to reterritorialise the European and indigenous languages.

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**A BRIEF BIO OF AUTHOR:** I completed my Masters Degree in English from Banaras Hindu University in 2011, qualified UGC NET in 2011 itself, and, I am presently working as an assistant Teacher at Margram High School, Margram, Murshidabad, West Bengal.

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