

Community as a Fictional Character

M.G.VASSANJI

Nurdin Lalani, the principal character of my novel *No New Land* is a former shoe salesman, with Gujarati antecedents, who has emigrated to Canada's largest city, Toronto, from Dar es Salaam, East Africa. He is in every way a "middling" man – middle aged, a middle son, not overly educated or ambitious – one of life's "small" people, definitely not a shaker of things. With Nurdin in Toronto are his wife Zera and their son and daughter. In their struggle to survive and upkeep their family in the new, often hostile and sometimes bewildering environment, the man and wife seek comfort in the embraces of a community – the Shamsi community, whose members like the Lalanis have come from East Africa and have their roots in Gujarat, and therefore speak the same language, and share the same history and traditions. Many of them now reside in the populous high-rise apartments of the immigrant neighbourhood of Rosecliffe Park. In Nurdin's own case, his success or failure in this uprooted state, his struggle for self-respect as a man and head of the family, are measured according to standards observed by his community which gathers, if not everyday as in the Dar es Salaam he's recently abandoned, then regularly in the weekly makeshift mosque held in a Toronto school gym. It is in the weekly mosque that the community has the leisure to appraise itself, scrutinise its members and their achievements, catch up with news and newcomers. Nurdin's inner struggles too find their definition in the moral framework of this community – its values, requirements and injunctions – and its worldview, as he battles against or tries to understand the temptations offered by a large Western metropolis and its lifestyle, and as he becomes aware that the world to which he's come is larger in every way than the communal colonial one that's circumscribed him so far. And finally, when Nurdin Lalani is accused of assaulting a young woman at work, and at the same time a chance meeting with an Indian woman offers him the opportunity to walk away from an unbearable family life into a new life of freedom, what he has recourse to in the former case, and what at the same time holds him back in the latter case, is the community.

Nurdin Lalani is a community man; community is his succour and his nemesis. Some critics in Canada have accused me of writing about the community rather than the individual, and thus in some way deviating from, failing, the traditional form of the novel. But Nurdin Lalani cannot be conceived without his Shamsi community, and as I have just tried to describe above, he does not exist without the community. In a sense, then, Nurdin

Lalani is the community. And in the sense that such a character is of interest and under scrutiny, the community, in fact, is the point of the novel, in a similar way as when in a novel set during the war, for example, the war is integral to and becomes the subject of that novel.

(As to the community vs individual criticism mentioned above, one can only attribute it to the small-town mentality of reviewers who would apply textbook procedures to new works, as if imaginative writing were done to college-level specifications. A novel either works or doesn't work as a story, a narrative, an imaginative construct or artifact, and as a reading experience.)

And so the Shamsi community is integral to *No New Land*. Even if the novel had been written for the community only, the community would still have had a large presence in it. The novel would have been different, of course, perhaps denser, and more intimate. But to the community, it itself would very much be a character in the novel, observing itself through a typical member presented as an individual and not very individuated character. In reality, though, the situation is somewhat complicated. The Shamsi community of my books is a fiction, in the precise manner that I will explain below.

*

Before I return to the Shamsis, I would like to describe two other communities, as they occur in the works of two writers, one an African and the other an Indian, and then go on to consider whether communities are not much more widespread than we sometimes think.

In the Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiong'o's novels, especially the early ones, *Weep Not Child* and *A Grain of Wheat*, the community is the Kikuyu tribe, especially during the colonial and post-colonial periods. In these early novels, the backdrop is the Mau Mau uprising by sections of the Kikuyu tribe against British colonial rule in Kenya. Ngugi's novels describe how that colonial rule, with white settlers taking up prime Kikuyu agricultural land, affected Kikuyu life, and what manner of choices, forms of resistance or collusion, were open to individuals in the Kikuyu villages during the uprising, and what consequences those choices entailed. The story of the tribe itself, during those tumultuous times, is very much the novel, for example *A Grain of Wheat*, as is the story of the various individuals and how they respond to the uprising. It is impossible to divorce the tribe from the novel, see the characters away from the tribe. In Ngugi's novels, the Kikuyuness, while being a component of being Kenyan, also stands apart. And for this we are grateful to Ngugi, because it is through his novels that we become aware of the Kikuyu tribe and what it underwent during the Mau Mau period, while, as individuals from our own communities, empathising with the individuals of that community. In responding thus, we are in no way patronising the work, treating it as anthropology, or as journalism, as sometimes tends to happen to writing from the third world or writing by immigrants in the West.

As another example consider the Malayali novel *Chemmeen* by Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai. This is a novel set in two fishing villages. Associated with the fishing villages are businessmen who buy and distribute the fish. The novel is about a girl in one of the villages who falls in love with one such young businessman, a Muslim. The young man is an outsider, first in not belonging to the village and its ancient fisherfolk's ways, and second, in being a Muslim. As we read the novel, we cannot escape the fact that we are reading about the two villages themselves – their customs, their conditions, their superstitions, prejudices and lores; indeed one could argue that in the end the novel is not simply a love story (which it is and a very touching one) but a story about peoples.

The two examples I have considered are those of fairly closed communities. One is used to calling such communities traditional. In fact the closure and the changes away from it are quite clearly also important themes of these novels. In contrast to them we may place the urban Nairobi novels of Meja Mwangi of Kenya, in which in the tumult of city life tribe or community no longer determines the characters' lives.

It is of course true in most if not all novels that the characters belong to the setting, which cannot simply be pulled down and replaced with another. The question as to whether a given social setup or background is said to be communal clearly depends on its degree of closure. One can talk of an American novel, for instance, but in a typical American novel, one does not feel the "Americanness" as a character. Even so, among American novels, one knows some to possess Jewish, Italian, or African American settings. There is more than an element of social closure in the novels of Bernard Malamud, Philip Roth, Mordecai Richler on one hand and those of Alice Walker or Toni Morrison on the other. Isn't Faulkner's Mississippi small-town setting communal, or indeed Robertson Davies's, within the tribe of Rosedale-Toronto, even when the characters go gallivanting about Europe? Indeed, it could be argued that the so-called mainstream novels are mainstream because of the dominance and expansion of the Western cultures and economies in the world. Lastly, it must be remembered that Bharati Mukherjee's Americanness notwithstanding, works like her short-story collection *Darkness* help to define, and operate within the confines of, that new community in the West, the "South Asian." And so we have small communities and large communities, those that have remained isolated or unexposed to a wider world, and others which because they belong to cultures that have spread their influences abroad and are widely known, are not considered as communities.

We may ask then, what is the difference between a Shamsi community in India (or East Africa), the Kikuyu tribe in Kenya, and the Jews or the Blacks in the US? We might come up with criteria of size, exclusivity, diversity within the group, and the hold of the group on the individual. But my concern here is with Nurdin Lalani's community in *No New Land*. What kind of community is it and how does it find itself inside a novel?

*

Nurdin Lalani belongs to what in India would be a religious community. A community of Gujaratis who were converted into Muslims in the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries by a line of *pirs*. There are many such communities in Gujarat. They have their own oral and written literature, their own mythology derived from folk versions of what we call Hindu mythology, and their own interpretations and adaptations of Islam. Being Muslim, the Shamsi community very much has real or perceived connections outside India. However, once outside of India it becomes an ethnic community, Gujarati Indian, defined by language, customs, and ancestral memory, which come to the fore in a foreign place.

The first migration of these people took place in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to East Africa. The emigration was pushed by difficult conditions locally and enticements of a better life abroad among a growing community. Many such Gujarati communities, Hindu and Muslim, planted new roots in East Africa; indeed, the connection of Gujarati traders to the East African coast goes back several centuries, although the numbers who emigrated there were not large until the last one hundred and fifty years. The emigration of Gujaratis, unlike that of Indians from Uttar Pradesh to the Caribbean, preserved their communities, whose structures and customs, languages and religions were modified only gradually and evolutionally and not due to outside pressures; secondly, this emigration was that of a trading and not a labouring people. An immigrant community in East Africa therefore had inbuilt strength and resistance to assimilation, which were enhanced by the British colonial policy of leaving the communities alone to do what they wanted under the law. The emigration of these same communities to Canada, UK, and the US occurred three to four generations later, mainly for political reasons, and by peoples who had put some distance between themselves and their ancestral homeland Gujarat (though maintaining language and customs) and who were more educated than their ancestors who had arrived from India. Despite the multicultural trends in the English-speaking countries to which they have immigrated, the pull to assimilation, and especially surrendering the language and drastically modifying customs, is much greater than there was in East Africa, which was actually a more viable multicultural environment. For example, the divorce rates of South Asians are much higher in the West, women are more independent, gays are much more accepted. The perception of Western lifestyles as the more mainstream in the world, their liberal and commercial attractiveness, the insecurities bred of racism in the new life and memories of life lived under colonialism, the restrictiveness of being a "minority" – all these have contributed to the trend towards assimilation. Nevertheless Black, Chinese, South Asian identities remain; what they will mean remains to be seen.

*

How does one "write" a community?

My own experience has been that though being somewhat a closed system, community is a complex and technically difficult social matrix to set a novel in. For example, one does not want to get bogged down with details which would merely hamper the fictional process; at the same time one needs sufficient detail to create authenticity and consistency of background and story. A real Indian community has a history, or even several interweaving, perhaps conflicting, histories. How important are these, in detail and accuracy to a novel? There is the problem of the objective distance of the author to the community; for the case I have in mind, that of the Shamsis, the distance had to be created. To put it another way, standing too close to the community, there is far too much of it visible to the author to be included within the novel, which after all is an artifact, confined by the number of words and the reading time. The fictional process requires a distance for fictional truths, fictional developments and conclusions to emerge unhampered by personal considerations. At the same time honesty requires a certain intimacy with the subject. Then there is the question of audience. How much does a "general" audience know about the background? What is the nature of the "general" audience? This determines, to a degree, the tone, the voice, the language, which details belong and which do not: that is, in what manner the community enters the novel.

Clearly then, even though operating within, or inspired by, a real community, a fictional world has to be created. The community in the novel is as fictional as the characters within it. It relates to the real community, if one exists, in a parallel fashion to how the novel's characters relate to real characters who have inspired them.

My strategy in dealing with these novelistic problems regarding the representation of a community has been to use a fictitious community, allowing me distance, imagination and flexibility, and independence from precise details. I have called this community the Shamsi community, and I introduced it in my first novel *The Gunny Sack*. I found that this was the only way in which I could write the novel, using essential background to tell the story of a family over several generations and discarding the nonessential parts. Only in this way could the complex of stories I wanted to relate be bounded, by the confines of the imaginary gunny sack from which they emerged (as, of course, within the confines of the physical book). I could play around with the geography of Gujarat, which for my narrator had acquired something of a mythical nature. I could invent towns in India and East Africa, and thus I was able to adopt a more elastic approach to history, which is an important aspect of the novel, without making it into a historical novel. One would say that history itself was fictionalised, while bearing a strong resemblance to and being inspired by "real history." I could highlight certain customs, giving them a more mythical significance. In this way I could

give the novel greater unity while imbuing it with dramatic sequences and narrative.

In my subsequent work, I have introduced more of the Shamsi community, for example, in *No New Land*, its presence in and response to Toronto, and in *The Book of Secrets* its life in East Africa as observed by a British colonial officer during the early parts of this century.

I have been able to be free with my invention of the community in the first place because there has been no major fictional work that deals with the material, and in the second place because the type of Indian community I have in mind had a very typically vague sense of history, in terms of remembered and mythologised origins.

*

My literary project, although this is not how I think when I write, has been to trace the origins of a community, its development in a British colony, and finally its dispersal in the postcolonial era. In this way I look at the present century from the perspective of a simple community as it evolves and arrives at a metropolitan consciousness and loses a large part of its traditional identity. One could say that such a community is acted upon by history, and thus enters a historical consciousness. In all of this, however, the individual within the community is of central concern. And in a final reversal, even as my novels make the community historical - paralleling what the modern world has done to it - by fictionalising the community, they have mythologised it.