

**Y**our fiction presents a tremendous range of human emotions and experiences, from simple joys of life to ironies of the most tragic kind. But these are repeatedly worked out in the context of a specific community which you fictionalize as the Shamsi community. Is it because you feel most at home with this community or...

This is not that unusual; we've seen it happen in Faulkner, Hardy, (Margaret) Laurence, Ngugi. I have also characters from a previous work in a new work, so Pipa of *The Book of Secrets* first appears in *The Gunny Sack* and in a story in *Uhuru Street*. It just seemed unnecessary to create a new character when I already had a host of them unexplored. You write about your world, every writer writes about his or her own world.

There is of course the risk of readers reading more into the characters, taking them to be real or even identifying some of them with me. There is nothing I can do about that. Characters undergo a great deal of transformation even if inspired by real people.

*Do you find this context restrictive in some ways?*

In some sense, yes; though I wonder which setting would not be restrictive. What to choose next: the urban women of Margaret Atwood? characters from Malgudi? the Rosedale setting of Robertson Davies?

My characters have lived in a variety of settings, from Porbander to Dar es Salaam to Boston and Toronto. I suppose what is common is their background, the 'community.' But that is not constant over time, and what I have attempted to do in my work, in partial terms (I have also tried to do many other things) is to trace the evolution of this 'background.' This will come to an end in present times, in the book that I have just completed in first draft.

*Your African narrative is far more textured and complex than the Canadian narrative in 'No New Land'. Is this due to your own experiences in the two societies...*

## I See Myself in terms of Contradictions

M.G. Vassanji

in interview with Pankaj K. Singh\*

The past I deal with in Africa is more distant, and so the process of its retrieval, larger questions about the relevance of history and memory, the pressure of the past on the present, have intrigued me and become part of the subject of the two novels you have in mind. Such questions do not easily arise in the case of the immediate past and the concerns of life as lived by immigrants in North America.

As far as forms are concerned, in the two novels, *The Gunny Sack* and *The Book of Secrets*, they were suggested by the nature of the novels, their subjects and concerns. The forms did not come prior to my thoughts and

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trials about what I was going to write.

You should remember that the stories in *Uhuru Street*, which are set in Africa also, are simply stories, in simple form, set in the past and not concerned with the past as such.

*What is your novel about?*

The book is called *Amrika*, a journey west, 'Amrika' being of course the Hindustani form of 'America.' I believe this will culminate my preoccupation with that community as background. I may continue to write about characters from that background, or I may not. But at present I feel a sense of finality, something coming to an end. Perhaps my novelistic preoccupations might change.

*You have experienced, in a way, a double dislocation - from India and then from Africa, your birth place, into yet another culture, that of North America. How do you*

*relate to the multiple components of your experience or, may I say, your multiple locations?*

I see myself in terms of contradictions. But contradiction for me is a healthy state, a creative state; purity I find abhorrent. And so I see myself as everything that's gone into me: Africa, where I was born and grew up; India in the larger sense, where my ancestry lies; Hinduism and Islam, which are my religious backgrounds; Britain, which colonized us and also built up some values and aspirations; America, where I went to university and spent what I consider crucial years of my life; and Canada, where I live and

which has, in spite of problems, embraced me so warmly. Of course, the world as we've seen it change in our lifetimes does not like such contradictions; it likes pure states; this or that. My answer is, *neti, neti*.

*How did you relate to India before you came here?*

Although I was brought up speaking Cutchi and Gujarati with a very strong sense of localized Indian culture - within a community - my education was in English and my first eleven years were spent in a British colonial situation. So most of us aspired to go to London, pick up better accents, become Westernized. India was not even a consideration. In university my engagement with India began because the Indian traditions I had been brought up with began to nag at me, yearning for understanding, as it were, a groundedness; one day I picked

up a copy of Nehru's autobiography in a book sale, after which I read many more books on India, mostly on mythology and religion, and even studied two years of Sanskrit in university. But later on, with my own family and other obligations, India as a strong preoccupation again receded into the background, until I was invited to come here in January 1993. Riots were on and I almost didn't come. . .

*You had mentioned once that there is no 'homecoming'. One always goes to a new home. How have you felt after visiting India?*

I first came to India four years ago; since then I have come every year. I have still not fully comprehended the impact of that first visit, I am working on it, in the form of a book. Everything looked so familiar, it was eerie; I seemed to fit in so easily. I could speak Gujarati and Cutchi, understand Sindhi, communicate passably in Hindi. I could identify so much with the place, the people, especially in the north; very few people asked me where I came from, and that not seriously, and when I answered 'Bombay' or 'Gujarat' these answers were accepted. What I realized soon enough, however, was that I had not internalized the recent history of the subcontinent. That was the difference, not the externals. And I realized there were some things that had become completely alien to me, that distressed me - to find religion as a mode of identity, where simple agnosticism is not even a category: religious belief, culture, the self, all fused into one and accepted more or less by all; to find residues of an 'us' and 'them' mentality in even the most liberal of people; and the total sanguineness in the face of corruption and the most gruesome violence. At the same time there were joyful things - I had forgotten the joy of singing, of watching people spontaneously break out into song.

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M.G. Vassanji is a Toronto-based novelist of Indian origin. Born in Kenya and raised in Tanzania, he went to university in the United States - at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the University of Pennsylvania - where he trained as a nuclear physicist. He taught and did research at the University of Toronto before his first novel *The Gunny Sack* received a Commonwealth Regional Prize for the best first novel, and was followed by *No New Land* (1991) and a collection of short stories *Uhuru Street* (1992). His next novel, *The Book of Secrets* (1993) won the prestigious Giller Prize for the best Canadian novel of the year. In 1989 he was also an international writer-in-residence at the University of Iowa. The interview with Vassanji was conducted when he was a Fellow at the IIAS.

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## Amrika, a Journey West

from

M.G. VASSANJI'S WORK IN PROGRESS

California. Was it always in the mind? Go West, young man, they used to say, didn't they - whoever they were - the movies most likely; or, as Grandmother would say, citing ancient lore with wide-eyed confidence or, later, a knowing smile at my teenager's new-fangled scientific scepticism - the sun will rise from the West, that's where the Lord will come from, the salvation. Later still, hippies beckoned with flowers and pot and freedom from norms, and West Coast girls were ... and Berkeley was radical Mecca, that's where the revolution came from and I thought Grandmother had been right after all. Ultimately, we learnt to settle down, adopting East Coast values and ways and could tell the difference between the flaky West and the solid East of the ivy league and Henry James and Boston, and subways and trams, and grey gritty streets in biting cold and apartments in alleys up dark creaky stairs in spite of which there was history and culture and irony. And California, too good to be true, always far out and a little too much...except those who went there inevitably fell to the wiles of the sun god and never returned. And the sea, don't forget old Neptune.

He had come to forget and start anew. Actually to dare, do the unthinkable, cohabit with a younger woman and think about the future. Again. His future; their future. Out in the East, he thought, he would be filled with grave doubts and anxious pangs of puritanical guilt at pursuing something so utterly selfish and joyful.

There were endless afternoons of love-making, of prolonged teased-out passion - tender moments of simple closeness, of oneness in body and soul, full of touching endearments, past misunderstandings now unwrapped and delightful as sweetmeats, memories and childhood stories shared and become part of each other. There were past lives to make up for, all that time now lost that they wished they had spent together. And there were so many places to connect, in which to begin to make up for that time: those little details in which to give more of each other, and open up more...and, ironically, isn't there even more left of ourselves; but we try, fragile victims of our mysterious selves, and in understanding of that we listen to each other.

It seemed that the physical - intense and vigorous and wonderful in itself - was but a paltry reminder of their emotional and spiritual

closeness.

"Rumina mimina..."

"Do I remind you of the little African girls in your street?"

"Yes...skipping rope or playing house or hopskotch..."

"Why...what reminds you of them?"

"I don't know."

"Perhaps it's my Africanness - perhaps it's all a romantic infatuation with the exotic - the other, is that what it's called -"

"I don't care for hidden meanings. All I know is that I love you very much now."

There is nothing else like such moments, one is such a child.

Is one entitled to this happiness? I've been taught of second chances but only when the outcome was spiritual. The world is a prison, we were taught, bondage to the body. The wise opt out of it, escape the endless cycle of birth and rebirth. That was your second chance. But a happy rebirth, second chance to a life of *this* world, to sensual homely happiness, seems like stealing from the cookie jar.

The sobriety came, inevitably; and the consciousness of homemaking: a relief to his cynical, puritan side that would tremble superstitiously at his bliss, but a come-down also, a reminder of past experience...isn't homemaking the end of passion and the beginning of partnership, the business of relationship? No no no no, she said, that is all wrong, it needn't be so, I will not permit it to happen...

Homemaking was to her, as he realized with tenderness, a consummation, flowering; a schoolgirl's romantic dream that had never seen fulfillment. But there was more to her craving; a home of her own was her second chance, the future that would seal off her terrible past. Only, was this jaded academic liberal turned printer, with a set of twins of his own, ready for that future?

"A little future," she said, with a sly smile.

"But that will grow."

He threw a glance at the entwined Makonde monkey carving. "Do you think the bad-luck genie can untangle that abstraction?"

"There is no bad-luck genie. That's just superstition. I have decided that."