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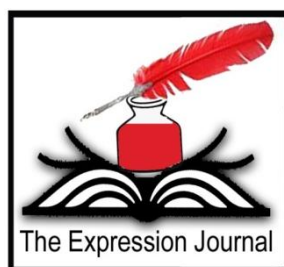


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DISCONTINUITY AS CONTINUITY: M.G. VASSANJI'S NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE

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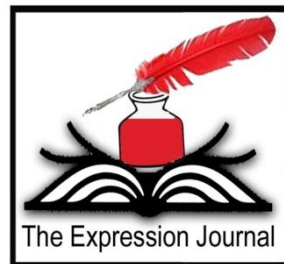
Abstract

This paper tries to analyze how the postcolonial writers suffer the cruelty of discontinuity. The writers are rootless and their writings exhibit the search for their roots. Colonization has effected displacement of human beings. This displacement has caused the migrants rootless and homeless. The sense of home which is connected to their past remains an area of darkness. Their lives in such an exiled situation kindle their power of creativity. They feel their past becomes dead at one point of time. They feel the burden of this discontinuity which creates mental conflicts in them. These conflicts get resolved when they resort to writing. The despair of homelessness is connected with a strong sense of historic consciousness. M. G. Vassanji has a special way of going into the past. He wants to expose that the history of the individuals, communities and nations are not only significant but also closely interrelated. His major concern happens to be “the past and its possible recovery in memory.” Memory plays a very important role in the process of recollecting, restoring and reconstructing the sources of his families and histories. The process of remembering the past includes communicative memory, cultural memory, collective memory and mnemohistory. Discovering and reconstructing the history of his community becomes the prime motif of Vassanji. He seems to be carried away by the thought of history. He feels that history is incomplete and discontinuous. He tells his readers that he is writing the history of his community as well as fiction. He clearly establishes through his writing that without the past, no matter how terrible it would be, one cannot bring their future. He writes only in relation to the past. His meditation of past through memory is an attempt to get redemption and re-creation. Vassanji has resurrected a particular type of history which comes forth in a multi-layered narration.

Keywords

Homelessness, Assimilation, Consciousness, History, Displacement, Roots, Communicative Memory, Cultural Memory, Mnemohistory, Collective Memory, Shamsi Community.

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Many of the postcolonial writers engage themselves in the process of writing fiction to determine their identity, and to trace the history of their community by portraying the significant changes in geographical, social, political and cultural spheres. They represent the problems of quest for self and identity in a distinctive manner. Their concern for the past allows them to expand the novel form to get it suited for articulating and elaborating the postcolonial enquiry of history through memory. The structure of the novel changes; the modes of narration change; the process of development of a character falls into a specific method; and the gaps between discontinuity and continuity become more and more complex. These postcolonial writers suffer the cruelty of discontinuity as they feel their roots. They take much pain to delineate a particular locale of community and they use the technique of repetition which helps them to inquire the past from different perspectives. Their main aim is to individualize the characteristics of the people of their community. Their text sometimes is taken as ethnic texts but the classification becomes the means of modifying and reshaping history. And thereby establish the personal and collective identity. The paradox is evident. The writers are rootless and their writings exhibit the search for their roots.

Colonization has effected displacement of human beings. It has affected many colonized countries like Africa and India. People from Africa have been transported to other parts of British colonized countries as labourers. Indians have migrated to West Indies, East Africa as indentured labourers to work in sugarcane fields and in laying railway lines. In addition some communities from India who are well - versed in trade have tried their luck by migrating to East Africa. This displacement has caused the migrants rootless and homeless. The first generation of migrants has managed to survive with a sense of psychological belonging to their homelands. The second generation of the migrants happens to suffer because of their sense of exile and non-belongingness. Their present is sandwiched between past and future. The sense of home which is connected to their past remains as an area of darkness. The anxiety to find a home drives them very hard. They become wanderers. Their lives in such an exiled situation kindle their power of creativity.

Certain writers intellectually analyze their despair of homelessness with a strong sense of historic consciousness. Such writers handle history with a different perspective. They feel a sense of being historically adrift and hence want to get themselves connected with history. History is not linear to them, and it becomes circulatory. "What has been" and "What might have been" may be part of the past, but they always point to the present. Real past and imaginary past get interwoven in the novels of postcolonial writers. They float the characters and incidents connected to history to make their personal history universal. The particular becomes universal. To them, history reveals the process of knowing: knowing about people and places.

M.G. Vassanji has a special way of delving into the past: to begin at the beginning. It is a discovery for him. The beginning is always Vassanji's favorite area where he places his characters with a sense of identity. He wants to expose that the history of individuals, communities, and nations is not only significant but also closely interrelated. Like Vassanji, many postcolonial writers who have exiled themselves for the purpose of becoming a writer have been deeply affected by the discontinuities of their past. They feel their past becomes dead at one point in time. They feel the burden of this discontinuity, which creates mental conflicts in them. These conflicts get resolved when they resort to writing. The process of writing makes them comfortable, shedding their anxiety of belonging nowhere. But paradoxically, their writings bring them everywhere.

Vassanji exercises a type of memory that consists of two moments: repetition and recollection. As Kerwin Lee Klein observes, "repetition involves the presence of the past while recollection involves present representations of the past" (131-133). Human memory is a storehouse of many treasures of the past: the presence of pure memory and the capacity to trace memory. The act of remembering can be considered as re-remembering, i.e., editing and clarifying the memory. Such active remembering helps one keep things of the past fresh. When writers in exile have been afflicted by wounds, this act of remembering would not be an act of introspection or retrospection. It would be a painful remembering, a way of putting together the discontinuous and dismembered past to understand the present. As Peter Burke observes, remembering the past and writing about it is no longer seen as innocent activities as they were once taken to be. Neither memory nor history seems objective anymore. In both cases, historians are learning to take into account conscious and unconscious selection, interpretation, and distortion. In both cases, they are coming to see the process of selection, interpretation, and distortion as conditioned or at least influenced by social groups. It is not the work of individuals alone.

This aspect gives rise to what Maurice Halbwachs termed "collective memory": collective awareness presumes collective memory. It cautions against the thought that only individuals are capable of memory and wants to establish that collective memory has important uses because "all remembering occurs within the social context of environment and discourse" (133). As Kerwin Lee Klein observes, "memory may also characterize groups by revealing debt to the past and expressing moral continuity. Memory is not a property of individual minds but the diverse and shifting collections of material artifacts and social practices" (130).

Vassanji's writings about the past gain what Kerwin Lee Klein observes: "the implication is that the emergence of memory as a category of academic discourse is a healthy result of decolonization." This kind of employment of memory appears to serve the problems of postcolonial writing, "either by consuming history whole or by weaving into it so as to

provide an authentic linkage with the past." Memory comes to history's aid, and this has become the dominant feature of decolonization: Memory is a mode of discourse. It is natural to people without history, and so its emergence is a salutary feature of decolonization. Memory serves many scholarly inquiries, and it takes studying with the concern that an inclusive history of its origins provides universal recognition. Hence, Michel Bucknor remarks that the significance of memory and the recording of the past should not be understated. Vassanji is clear in his insistence on confronting the past as a way forward. His presentation of history is neither nostalgic recapture nor romanticized mythology, which is particularly important when read in the light of postcolonial theory (23).

Furthermore, he observes that history is not taken as a great given. In focusing on memory as a source of history, Vassanji accentuates the problem with a cultural history which is constructed incomplete, merely an account by the one who tells it (23). Vassanji's major concern happens to be "the past and its possible recovery in memory" (Ojwang 174) and employs memory as the most enduring means to get his characters accessed in it.

History writing will help one to have a comprehensive understanding of the past but not in the most influential way. When the knowledge of the past is transferred to the next generation, the scene gets a different focus because the events of the past create a greater impact and meaning. There is a shift in the recognition of the events of the past which gives rise to a new approach to the study of memory and history called Mnemohistory, a term coined by Jan Assmann in 1997, who defines it as concerned not with the past but only with the past as it is remembered. It surveys the storylines of traditions, the webs of intertextuality, the diachronic continuities and discontinuities of reading the past.

Vassanji's process of remembering the past includes communicative memory, cultural memory, collective memory, and mnemohistory. To Vassanji, even the slightest or insignificant event can draw thoughts that live very deep in his memory. The artifacts draw a perpetuation of the past through recollections of spent emotions. Individuals sometimes take their own remembrance and at times are led to remember.

Discovering and reconstructing the history of his community becomes the prime motif of Vassanji. He seems to be carried away by the thought of history. He feels that history is incomplete and discontinuous. He is critically examined as a writer who is obsessed with the thought of history.

"My obsession with history comes out of my circumstances. History, which I cared little about in school, was a source of my early frustrations. When I was older, I didn't seem to have it. It is now my interest and my hobby. Obviously, it finds itself reflected in my fiction."

There is history for the larger population, a history for the dominant culture, but there is no history for minor communities. His deep meditation on history makes him understand the language and methodology of history. He feels that history allows for many perspectives. History has its own strengths and weaknesses. One cannot conclude that there is only one history, but one finds many histories. "There is always more to learn, there is always a need to re-examine, to reinterpret" (Sayed 316). Everybody can tell their own story. Vassanji admits, "History is a human product to which literature and myths bear legible witness" (Sayed 319).

When one's history has not been told before or is impossible to tell in detail, when recorded facts don't exist but myth and fantasy do, the novelist may write history in a creative manner. He continues to establish his own process of writing fiction in relation to history. The creative process, in my opinion, is best left alone to do its work. I do not write history. The reason for his obsession with history comes from his irritation that the history of his

community has been overshadowed by the colonial communities. I come from the circumstances—an Indian community among other Indian communities in colonial East Africa in which history, my history was not given much consideration. Vassanji, to construct the history of his community, he brings in the stories of his relatives and his neighbors, which he admits. So even one of our Darjis (tailors) told stories, I have used that in *The Gunny Sack* and also in *The Magic of Saida*. Vassanji is able to find coordinates through the stories of his own people, from certain documents, and from certain historical events. Vassanji's memory plays a very important role in the process of recollecting, restoring, and reconstructing the sources of his families and histories. Vassanji examines through the sources how his subjects have lived, have been caught in the ambivalent position, and how they have to migrate to other places. He has much confidence as Ojwang observes that "the past and its possible recovery in memory" (GS174) is feasible. Vassanji seems to tell his readers that he is writing the history of his community as well as fiction. He interjects fictional narration with historical effects. He disrupts the time sequence also. It is not linear; it becomes circulatory. Vassanji not only writes about his community but also the events around colonialism. Vassanji's main concern is to establish the identity and the lineage of his community. The very thought of writing about his community makes Vassanji caught in two spheres of time—past and present. Who, what, how, and where were the Shamsi community in the past? And who, what, how, where are the Shamsi community now? The in-betweenness between past and present status of the community allows Vassanji to juxtapose the past and present in his writings. Moreover, the Shamsi community is known for their ambivalent position. They are sandwiched between the colonial whites and the native blacks. Vassanji is forced to narrate the middle position of past and present which he feels is discontinuous. He is programmed to go to the past and takes the thread of continuity to the present. In his first novel, *The Gunny Sack*, he traces the past for about one hundred and fifty years about the lives of four generations. He concludes the novel with the narrator's knowledge of the past of his community and his realization in the present. Tracing the past has not been easy. He meets lots of mysteries and some of the mysteries had been resolved through the stories and coordinates which he has received through collective memories and some mysteries have gone unresolved. The novel *The Book of Secrets* is about those unresolved mysteries. The people of the Shamsi communities have been moving to Uganda and Dares Salaam. After African decolonization, Africa becomes no longer safe and they start to move to England, Canada, and America. Vassanji himself has acknowledged that he has moved to America and to Canada. This double displacement of the members of the Shamsi community makes them think about their in-betweenness occurred between past and present. Memory becomes a burden for them.

They are unable to forget their past and cannot feel at home in the adopted countries at present. They are caught between the displacement and assimilation, like the Tantalus position. Displacement refers to their past condition, while assimilation refers to their process of reconciling with the present while understanding the past. The first generation survived with their own community identity by carrying the traditions of their past. The second generation prepares themselves for acculturation.

Vassanji brings the stories of his ancestors from the past and expands time and space to better understand the present. His consciousness of time reflects Eliot's meditation in *Burnt Norton*, where Eliot states that time past and time future contain time present. Vikram Lall's exploration of the past is relevant because he wants to erase his guilt. He believes he has an

opportunity to go back to his past and make amends. His journey into the past evokes Warren's thoughts on time.

Vassanji adopts a simple thread of narration with a complex texture. When someone is asked to explain who they are, they need to delve into their past to establish their own identity and understand their origin through memory. Traveling through memory is inevitable. If recollection is not possible, one must find coordinates, either oral coordinates from other individuals or written facts from history. With these coordinates, one can reconstruct their own past and attempt to write a kind of mythology in a historical format. After reading Vassanji's novels with the intricacies of history and the stories of the Shamsi community, readers may feel what Pius Fernandes achieves at the end of *The Book of Secrets*: "A chapter of world history... therewith... closed. We went with the best of intentions" (BS 329).

History is full of facts, but facts may suppress the spirit and lives of myths. The process of demythicizing historical facts creates another history. The most important factor in demythicizing history is to bring the relevance of the past to the present. Robert Penn Warren wonderfully analyzed the process of demythicizing. It makes legendary figures more real, enabling the present culture to identify with them. There is no obsolete positive past available to us, no matter how rigorously we strive to determine it – as strive we must. Inevitably, the past, as far as we know it, is interference, creation, and paradoxically, it can be considered its chief value for us. By creating the image of the past, we create ourselves. Reconciling the past with the present requires attending to how history is constructed. (Making History 20-21)

Through his writing, Vassanji has clearly established that without the past, no matter how terrible it may be, one cannot shape their future. He writes only in relation to the past. His narration dominates a nostalgic tone, recounting and recollecting. The passage of time and the future hold the present, making his writing very interesting. His meditation on the past through memory is an attempt to find redemption and re-creation. Vassanji has resurrected a particular history that unfolds in a multi-layered narration. His roots are transferred into the book of fictional history, which is easily accessible and portable: "My own roots are portable... My roots travel with me, in my pocket... they are, in the end, my sense" (Bissoondath 26).

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