

The Creative Launcher

Journal Home URL: <https://www.thecreativelauncher.com>

ISSN: 2455-6580

Issue: Vol. 7 & Issue 4, (August, 2022)

Publisher: Perception Publishing

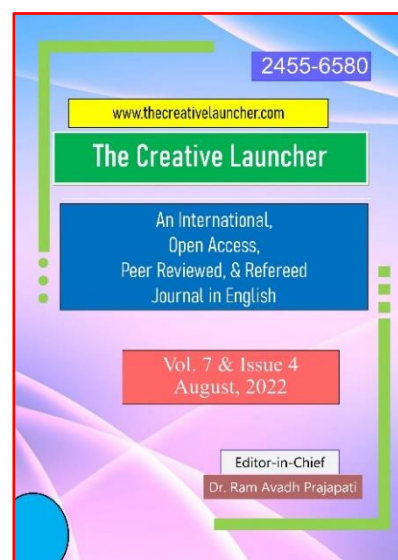
Published on: 30 August 2022

Peer Reviewed & Open Access: Yes

Journal DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.53032/issn.2455-6580>

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Article History: Abstract and complete research article received on: 22 July 2022 | Revised article received: 23 July 2022 | Accepted: 20 August 2022 | First Published: 30 August 2022

Research Article



Ethnic Identity and Cultural Assimilation in M. G. Vassanji's *No New Land*

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 <https://doi.org/10.53032/tcl.2022.7.4.12>

Pages: 89-95

Abstract

Colonialism makes a large set of people from South Asia migrate to Africa. People from India are used as a man power for railway line construction in Africa. After the end of colonialism, these migrated people became competitors to Africans in employment. Africans start treating them harshly. So, they are forced to migrate once again to America or to Canada. M. G. Vassanji's *No New Land* starts with the second migration of people from South Asia to Canada. Because of this second migration, these people want to make sure their connection to their culture and to their ethnicity. Their apartment in Canada looks like a mini version of Dar es Salaam. They try to stick to their Indianness in the midst of a completely strange culture. However, their kids who do not have any immediate connection with their culture start assimilating the new culture and way of living. This paper aims at projecting the plight of South Asian immigrants in Canada.

Keywords: Colonialism, Ethnicity, Assimilation, Immigrant, Culture, Migration, Resistance, Homelessness, Relationship, Indo-African Literature, Cultural Loss

The novel *No New Land*, second novel of M.G. Vassanji, portrays the life of Asian immigrants from Africa settled in Toronto. It clearly depicts the double displacement of Asian people. The first immigration happens due to colonisation. The British Government is in need of workers for railway line construction in British East Africa. Indian labourers are forced to migrate to Africa for railway line construction work. Claude Markovits observes about the 'passenger migration' and 'indentured migration' in his article "Afterword: Stray thoughts of an Historian on 'Indian' or 'South Asian' 'Diaspora(s)':

The best-known case is that of the indentured labourers in rural Gujarat and Punjab, amongst the Patels and Ramgharia Sikhs, to build the Uganda railway in the early twentieth century. A few thousand out of a total 40,000 (many of whom died on the job) stayed behind in East Africa, at the expiration of their contracts, and formed the backbone of the class of small traders or dukawallas, which dominated trade in the interior of East Africa. (265)

As mentioned above, many people face death during the construction of railway lines. And few migrated people live in British East Africa and make that as their new home. But this new home does not last for long. After the independence of Africa from the British, Africans started treating Indians harshly. This created a state of homelessness for Asians immigrants. Since they do not have any contact with their motherland, they do not prefer to go there and start a new life. Their only options are to be there and tolerate the Africans or to go to Canada or the United States of America. Many people predict the change of behaviour in African people, move to Canada and begin their new life. This paper aims at projecting the plight of Asian immigrants in Canada. As it is their second immigration from their origin, they struggle a lot to

retain their ethnic identity in the new society and at the same time they start assimilating the society's majority group.

Nurdin Lalani is the protagonist of the novel *No New Land*. The novel begins with Nurdin in a distressed state. He is accused of sexual harassment in his work place. In a new place with such a black mark on his character, Nurdin is in a predicament. He does not know what he is going to do to change this. He cannot tolerate this accusation especially in front of his wife and children. He worried that his reputation would fall down in the new place and if it spreads to their entire community, it becomes very threatening for his career in Canada. Back in Dar es Salaam, he has a wonderful life. But here he has to struggle a lot even with his family members to prove his worth. His father Haji Lalani thinks that finally he finds a land for his family members to live.

On a stone bench in Dar, at Oyster Bay overlooking the Indian Ocean, two men would quietly sit....: the land of their birth which they had left a long time ago, to which even the longing to return had been muted, although memories still persisted. (10)

Haji Lalani comes to Africa, when he is sixteen. At first, his heart always belonged to India and he wanted to go back to India. But before his death, at the ripe age when he stares at the Indian Ocean, he feels happy being in Africa. He thinks that finally he makes Africa his home and also it will be the home for his family members. Unfortunately, after the independence of Africa, it is no longer the place for Indians. Everybody is in the situation to move to different places. Nurdin's family faces lots of difficulties to get their visa to Canada. On their journey they decide to visit London. But their entry into the city is denied by immigration officers. This shows that the situation all over the world is not the same after decolonization. With a heavy heart they move to Canada. Their apartment Rosecliffe Park looks like a mini version of Dar es Salaam. Many settlers from Africa stay there and they maintain good relationships with each other.

These settlers struggle a lot to retain their ethnic identity in the new majority society. They try to connect to their culture by strictly following their African way of living which has its root in India. For instance, their food habits and their dressing style. Speaking about food habits, the entire building sixty-nine in the Rosecliffe apartment smells like a multicuisine restaurant. Because people from different regions of India, which is known for its diversity, are now the residents of Canada.

Whatever one thinks of smells, it must be conceded that the inhabitants of Sixty-nine eat well. Chappatis and rice, vegetable, potato and meat curries cooked the Goan, Madrasi, Hyderabad, Gujarati and Punjabi ways, channa the Caribbean way, fou-fou the West African way. (65)

People belonging to different regions of India are now under the same roof and they feel very proud of their own communities' culture and tradition. It looks like a competition of smells of various curries cooked in various ways by different people. These people are

connected to their roots or origin by means of food. Initially they are attracted by the western food in the new land, later they start sticking to their traditional food.

Nurdin's wife Zera retains her ethnic identity using her religion. It is usual that being a minority group, it is an obsession for those people to show their way of living and their belief is not inferior to that of the majority. We can find this state with most immigrants. Zera Lalani has a strong belief on her religion and she is very austere when it comes to religion and culture. She never wears pants or any other westernised costume. She always wears a traditional dress and advises her daughter Fatima to follow the same.

Missionary, who reflected on values and tradition, and sent his verdict: If you wear pants, cover your behinds. An ardent request was submitted by Zera and his other former pupils, begging him to emigrate. We are desperate for guidance, they said. Life is here is full of pitfalls. (68)

Whenever Zera has a doubt or difficulties to adapt to the new culture, she writes to the missionary in Africa. She insists the missionary to visit Canada and to give guidance for them to live in the new place without getting polluted by the new culture. Even though Zera is more religious and strictly follows the tradition and culture of her roots, she started changing her attitude knowingly or unknowingly in her household. This is all because of her financial independence in the new land. Back in Africa, Nurdin is the only person earning for their family. In South Asian families, it is the duty of the men to earn and women take care of the household and satisfy the needs of men and children in the family. After coming to Canada, Nurdin is marginalised in his family due to his unemployment. He searched for a job in many places but he couldn't find one. This situation in the family forces Zera to go for work. Female immigrants were given job opportunities in the first place. Zera gets a receptionist job immediately after their arrival to Canada. Her income is the first source of money to the family in Canada. They even bought the appropriate winter clothes for the newland with the money she earned. This newly found financial independence changes the traditional wife of Nurdin. In Africa, Nurdin had never entered the kitchen to do the household chores. However, in Canada, he had no other options. He had to do something in the home to make himself productive and also show him as useful in the family. "You clean up, do laundry, do anything, so as not to appear useless" (45). Zera finds herself a powerful and prominent member of the family. Being in the patriarchal society for so long and coming to the new land where people give importance to gender equality fancies Zera. She starts avoiding her husband in bed. Her affiliation to the culture and tradition vanishes when she supposed to satisfy the sexual needs of her husband. She goes to work, comes back to home, takes care of children and pays her respect to God. But she fails to be a wife who takes care of her husband's sexual need. She avoids her husband in the name of religion. She shows herself as more pious and devotes herself to God and does not have any sexual desire towards her husband. Nurdin and Zera are not sexually active for a long time. Nurdin's friend Romesh finds that Nurdin is not happy in his sex life. He advised Nurdin to take it from his wife instead of asking. When Nurdin followed the advice of his friend:

So he tried just taking her one night, but she had given such a scream, a yelp, that Fatima and Hanif came running, Fatima lumbering in the lead. Zera did not help him with explanations, she let him go to sleep with the knowledge that the kids already guessed what had happened. (139-140)

Nurdin is filled with sexual desires but Zera is not interested in sexual life. After this embarrassing incident, Nurdin never ask for sex to his wife. He is filled with confusion. He sees the youth in Canada and their carefree approach towards morality and religion. He is taught not to look at another man's woman in his culture and religion. But he does not know what to do, "what if yours doesn't give?" (141). This confusion makes him look at the culture of the majority. After his wife's rejection he is filled with lust and he satisfies himself by looking at the tightly dressed women in Canada. Zera knows his sexual thoughts and his behaviour of looking at the women with the lusty eyes. But it doesn't bother her. "Hurry up, Nurdin, stop loitering like a boy" (141). This is the only response of Zera for Nurdin's lusty eyes. Zera changes once she starts supporting the family financially. She fails to love her husband and be there for him. She knows that there is something wrong with Nurdin when he starts coming late to the house. She feels that he is hiding something from the family. She doesn't even ask him about that. When Nurdin is accused of sexual charges by the girl, his family do not believe him in the first place. Frank Birbalsingh writes about Nurdin's plight in his article South Asian Canadian writers from Africa and the Caribbean: "The incident illustrates the uneasy contact of immigrant innocence with calculated hostility" (104). Zera asks him, "Weren't you tempted?" (184). She wants to know whether he had committed the crime or not. His family does not give him enough support to solve his problem. It would have been different if the same situation happened to him in Africa. In Canada, Nurdin's problem seems to be a problem for him alone. Wife and the children in the family measure how his problem is going to affect them. They do not realise that they are in the position to support him. Western culture teaches them to be self-oriented. They do not think about Nurdin but about themselves. The friction between Zera and Nurdin is quite evident to people around them. When Zera offers a cup of tea to the missionary, he refuses to take from Zera and insists that he will drink the tea which is prepared by his wife. He purposely avoids taking the tea from Zera to teach her a very valuable lesson from their culture that a wife should take care of her husband and a husband should be loyal to his wife. He listens to the problem of Nurdin's family and gives strength to them to face it and solve it. He assures that their problem will definitely get solved. Zera is indirectly told to look after her husband and to bring peace and harmony to the family.

Nurdin's state is pathetic in Canada. He is looked down upon by his family members. His children see him as a failure. Nurdin, after spending most of his time lonely in Toronto, gets placed in the Ontario Addiction Centre and befriends Romesh. Romesh changes Nurdin's idea of ethnicity. Nurdin's cultural assimilation starts when he eats sausage. At first, he regrets eating pig. Romesh convinces him by saying that there is nothing wrong in eating pig. Nurdin also seems to be convinced by the argument of Romesh. He also starts using the loops in the

religious text only to make himself believe that he is not guilty. He says to himself that he is not committing any crime but enjoying life and doing the things that his heart longs for. "There is nothing wrong with tasting, you know. From what I know of the Quran, only getting intoxicated is forbidden" (143). He even tastes the beer with the strong belief that drinking beer would not be a problem according to the Quran. Slowly, the conversion of Nurdin's character begins in the novel. Later in the novel, he even goes to see a peep show with his friend Romesh. This shows that he starts assimilating the culture of the majority. He starts visiting his childhood friend Sushila and keeps that as a secret to his family. His relationship with Sushila shows his longingness for being loved. Sushila also shows her sexual interest on Nurdin. Being a widow in the new land, she is free from prejudices and has freedom to act as per her wish. Nobody in Canada is going to judge her for talking with men or befriending them or inviting them to her house. It seems that Sushila enjoys the freedom she found in the new land.

Children of these settlers are coming with numerous questions which the parents can't answer and children want to celebrate Christmas. This worries the parents of immigrants that their children would change in their future by following western culture. They think that Canada is their country. "The children were well on their way, "Canadians" now, or almost." Parents persuade their children to attend Quran class. They try to create a link between the children and their ethnic culture. They convince them to dress modestly. Of course, when these children become adults, they will dress according to their wishes. But parents struggle a lot to bring up their child in foreign land. Parents can evidently see the change in the behaviour of their children when they send them to school. The first thing to change is their language. "But when she opens her mouth, outflows impeccable Toronto English..." (64). The sense of ethnic identity in their small social group makes all the people forget about their financial status and their educational background. People of all social hierarchies are acquainted with one another and they celebrate all the festivals together and have several parties within their apartment. They always speak about their life back in Dar es Salaam. Even though they try hard to be ethnic in the new land, change is inevitable. The culture of the majority makes them question their own culture. The rituals which they follow in their country seem meaningless to some of the immigrants when they see the majority of the people not following it. By this way a new culture is emerging through the immigrants. They are going to be partly Indo-Africans and partly Canadians in the near future. In *Location of Culture*, Homi K. Bhabha speaks about the culture as 'transnational' and 'translational':

Culture as a strategy of survival is both transnational and translational. It is transnational because contemporary postcolonial discourses are rooted in specific histories of cultural displacement... the fraught accommodation of Third World migration to the West after the second World War, or the traffic of economic and political refugees within and outside the Third World. (*Location of Culture*, 172)

Immigrants from Africa to Canada in the novel *No New Land*, at first struggle a lot to live in the new country. They want to be strictly Indo-Africans in the beginning. Later, when the days

passed, they started assimilating the culture of Canada. As per the explanation of Homi K. Bhabha, we can see culture as a strategy of survival. In the first few days, they are grappling for their ethnic identity. As the days passed their attitude towards culture changed. They slowly started becoming Indo-African Canadians among Canadians.

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