

# The Paradox of (Dis)location in Moyez Vassanji's Novels – The In-Between World of Vikram Lall and The Gunny Sack

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**Abstract**— The concept of migration has been a dominant topic that has elicited many scholarly debates. The African migration to the diaspora can be traced as far back as pre-historic times during slavery and colonialism and has continued to pervade through diasporic research. Most of the existing literary studies focuses on the experiences of African descendants in the diaspora. Little attention has been to the experiences of Indian immigrants in the East Africa region. Therefore, this paper seeks to address the paradox of dislocation in Moyez Vassanji's novels *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall* and *The Gunny Sack*. The paper conceptualizes the concept of dislocation in the form of journeys, paradoxes, and experiences of the immigrant Asian as fictionalized in M.G Vassanji's two novels. The novels were purposively sampled to meet the objective of the paper. The discussion was arrived at through close reading, analysis and interpretation of the selected novels. This study utilizes postcolonial theory as foregrounded by Homi Bhabha. The paper finds that the immigrants' dislocation is marked by psychological and spatial dilemmas as well as emotional incubuses.

**Index Terms**— Dislocation, Postcolonial, Diaspora, Immigrant, Indian, East Africa.

## 1. Introduction

The present Asian community in east Africa consist largely of descendant of Indian labourers who were introduced in to region by the British during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century. During this time many Indians were imported to construct a railroad from the coast of Kenya to Lake Victoria during World War 1. As minority members in the diaspora, they continue to myriad of challenges as scholars argue that the issue of migration has its own effects on the individuals involved in migration, the host community and the society from where the migrants originated. As migrants they become strangers in a new world, whose normal experiences are extraordinary to them, sometimes odd or bizarre. It is at this juncture that the issue of dislocation emanates. Asian immigrants are physically separated from their native homes; hence, dislocation becomes one of the postcolonial dilemmas with which individuals in mobility are grappling. Their cultural experiences are alien to their host and vice versa, and their generational memories may start to lose historical records, or be distorted from the realities of their homelands. This now sets the stage for an exploration

of the physical, cultural, and psychological dislocation examination including the dislocation of memory. Because of the physical, cultural and physical dislocation, diasporic people pursue to maintain relationship ties with people back in their homelands (Kazanjian, 2021). The dislocation can be perceived from the dimension of the immigrant as an unhomely state with entirely new social systems and practices that are foreign to them. As foreigners detached from what they have been used to new unfamiliar phenomena create the justification for the claim that they are dislocated by being in the new host countries. Therefore, this study will provide knowledge done and to the corpus of knowledge available with special reference to M.G Vassanji and can be used by policymakers in the administration of Asians as a special community in East Africa as members who are detached from their native country.

## 2. (Dis)location in the In-Between World of Vikram Lall and the Gunny Sack

Dislocation can be viewed from the fact that immigrants seek to influence social, cultural, economic and political issues in their homelands. They are physically 'displaced', living in an alien land, where they may have lost touch with the events unfolding in their homelands. As such, the physical separation is not confined to that physical attribute of dislocation only, it can, in some ways, overlap with other forms of dislocation where they may adopt new cultural identities in the diaspora extant from those in their homelands, be subjects of psychological dilemma and suffering due to new psychological actualities of contradictions.

## 3. Cultural Dislocation

Cultural dislocation is realized when the "set of dynamics, processes, and structures that engender marginality and persistent inequality" create a sense of difference among human beings which would otherwise not exists as social constructions (Shash, 2022). It may create a dilemma for the migrant on how to react to social realities in new ways that they have not been accustomed to leading to cultural hybridity. Cultural dislocation may result in a feeling of pain, suffering and rejection through a collision of their cultural growth and orientation and their new

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experiences in host lands. For instance, in *The Gunny Sack* Kulsum endures the pain of being childless and to overcome this as culture dictates, she sought the services of a holy man from India the narrator observes:

Seven years passed; seven years of childless marriage, in which *joshis, pandits, sheikhs* and *pirs* were consulted, stars, tea leaves, palm and archaic read, predictions made and proved false. Then came Suleiman Pir. He was a holy man from Bombay who had a strong following in East Africa. Whenever Suleiman Pir came from Bombay, a mela was held. (78)

Kulsum fails to conceive to her husband Juma after seven years of marriage. To avert her situation, Suleiman Pir, a holy man from India. This demonstrates that every community has or possesses core or essential cultural underpinnings. Though Kulsum is a diaspora citizen, they have to seek the services of a holy man from Bombay with a strong following in East Africa to culturally cleanse Kulsum to bear a child.

Huseni is not appreciated in society because of his unique characteristics which are forbidden and feared. Concerning the forbiddance, he becomes dislocated from his immediate circle of close relatives due to alienation justified by his hybrid status and mixed racial heritage. In this way, he is ostracised socially and psychologically, yet, physically he lives in the Asian community. This is because he is regarded as an inferior human being who contaminates the race and the community at large and this situation dislocates him further. He is referred to as the 'other' amongst the people he ought to identify with as a family. He wonders how the world would be if there could more Husenis "would the world be different if that trend had continued if there had been more Husenis, and if these chocolate Husenis with curly hair had grown up..." (11)

The community has lost its purity and boundaries through assimilation process resulting to Huseni who are forbidden in society. Hence, marriage contact between Asians and Africans is deemed illegitimate. This makes the marriage a unique case of revulsion among the Indians and consequently, they elect to dislocate it from their intent of accepting it to negating the marriage, becoming another classic example of a marriage example that shows how diasporic people in interracial marriages may not fit with the communities they marry from. In many communities, hybridity through marriage tends to be a cultural bridge of uniting people, yet in this case, it does not serve that function and that marriage is deemed alien, illegal and dispositioned to exist, hence dislocated from achieving interconnectivity to other communities (Dewi *et al.*, 2019). Huseni who is also referred to as the "*simba*" belongs to the jungle and has the instinct to kill or dilute the pure race. His friends are '*mshenzis*', the barbarian who has failed to embrace modernity and civilization. It denotes they have elected to dislocate from positive progress, remaining backwards as the Indians negotiate advancement.

Cultural dislocation extracts or truncates an individual from a place, where they were subjects of a particular set of cultural practices and norms, and placing them in strange or new areas where cultural practices are alien convoluting their cultural identity. (Dajani, 2018). Dhanji Govindji through a diasporic citizen in *The Gunny Sack* established a firm cultural position

as an Indian with the local community. He blends with the local culture though he is a Shamsi from India. To ground the relationship of people from different cultural underpinnings where Dhanji feels dislocated, the narrator notes that Matamu in inhabited several communities, the *Moslem (Swahili and Shamsi)* and Hindu families. All members celebrated *Diwali* and *Idd* in styles "*Diwali* and *Idd* were celebrated jointly and with great pomp, with processions, dances, and feasts; surely a sign, as any, of prosperity and stability" (41). The *Diwali* feasts, dances and processions are synonymously practised by Asians in India. Nevertheless, these cultural aspects are also adopted and practised by the Asian diaspora in East Africa to show how diaspora people are influenced to adopt the lifestyle of the local community. Even with the presence of the German coloniser in Tanganyika, the Indian community is accepted. For instance, when the German soldiers were searching for "three Maji Maji rebels, in Matamu Indian houses were not searched" (20)

In the novel *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall*, Vassanji through a flashback of Vikram presents a vivid case of cultural dislocation and hybridity among Asians. Kenya's narrative of the postcolonial national liberation movement pushes Vikram to claim his position as an Afro-Asian citizen in Kenya. To induct him into the Mau Mau movement his friend Njoroge administers a cultural oath which must be kept in secrecy as the narrator says "all those secrets I have told you, you will not tell anybody...you must take an oath (82)." Njoroge dramatically executes the oath to Vikram by going the arch seven times under the Mugumo tree in the presence of a slaughtered goat or sheep whose guts are spilt out as the narrator says: "Using a twig, we mixed our blood, taking turns, and he said to me, now take the oath" (82). Vikram does not understand the relevance of the oath hence, together with his Asian community in Kenya feel culturally dislocated and outsiders.

#### 4. Psychological Dislocation

The condition of being an immigrant has been a peculiar subject in postcolonial literature. It represents individuals who are physically estranged from their homeland making them develop the feeling of being out of their original and ancestral place. No matter whether it is voluntary or exile by coercion, such persons, and diasporic characters take part in dissimilar cultural identity processes (Edouihri, 2021). No two people experience the same phenomenon in the same manner due to the subjective nature of human beings. Because of their physical separation from their native homelands, people in the diaspora with the first-hand cultural experience of their homelands may recreate that sense of illusionary reality by living an imaginary life in the diaspora, which may alienate them from the new cultural identities and formations and people that accommodate them in diaspora, Clini & Valančiūnas, (2021).

For instance, Ji Bai in *The Gunny Sack* is alienated from the new environment in the diaspora. She is nostalgically consumed by the feelings of her native home which she has connections to and wants to go back to. She keeps on romanticizing the existence of Bajupur, her native home "One day Ji Bai said to her family, quite casually, I want to go to Bajupur. Bajupur!

They were stunned. Does it still exist? Who is there, in Bajupur? (305). This shows a deep sense of nostalgia to be bound by the Indian cultural traits of being tied into families with strong bonds. This has been documented in the sense that it has been noted that the family takes priority over the individual, Scroope, (2018). This cultural experience may be lacking in her new locality, more so, considering that the people she adores most like her sister are not within her proximity in the diaspora. This example clearly shows her value for her native cultural value of family relations is still deeply ingrained in her, creating the deep longing she has for her sister.

Although India has always been a fantasy land to the narrator In *The In-Between World of Vikram*, Vikram's father is torn between Kenya and India and has a strong feeling and attachment to his homeland by going back to India "My father—proudly Kenyan, hopelessly (as I now think) colonial—went to India once, and brought back my mother" (14) Joseph too on his exile due to his criticism of the new regime feel estranged in Canada but obsessed and hunted by past colonial oppression. Psychological dislocation is created by the sense of harbouring a deep longing to go back to his people, which evidences that the character Joseph, is experiencing a diasporic experience of nostalgia when away from his people in his ancestral lands. The narrator observes that "Joseph too has an obsession with the past, that of his people, the Kikuyu who paid the harsh price of the British rule in Kenya" (20). Despite immigrants losing their home and homeland through long journeys of migrations, they psychologically reaffirm their links and owe allegiance to their native home. The two novels capture the feelings of estrangement of the diaspora who are enduring a state of restlessness invoking the problems of homelessness and a sense of belongingness.

According to Srivastava (2022), psychological dislocation arises from a sense of having lost one's homeland anchorage, and ancestry and living in an ideal state of rootlessness. They are considered 'others' in areas where they have no connections to anybody. That sense of alienation leads to psychological dislocation because they do not find solace in the new geographical locations due to cultural shock. New awful experiences in foreign lands may result in traumatic feelings for individuals who are cut off completely from the psycho-social support systems in the foreign lands. For instance, in *The Gunny Sack*, during independence in Zanzibar, the Asian experienced dreadful occurrences which affected them as members of the diaspora community. The prime minister declared that they must intermarry with Africans "At a Diwali celebration, the Prime Minister of Zanzibar said that Asians must intermarry with Africans" (204). Psychological dislocation is seen in the way the mothers of Indian girls are anguished by their daughters being subjected to legally compulsive services. This too is unveiled when the government of Tanganyika passed a decree that all high school and university leavers should attend a compulsory national service, the narrator, as a diaspora individual is psychologically haunted.

Sense of "otherness" psychologically affects members of the diaspora as vividly reflected through Vikram Lall in *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall* the notion of 'you and 'we'

perplexes him (305). On the same note, Jomo Kenyatta, the first president of post-independent Kenya invokes the word 'wahindi'- Indians to reinforce the feeling and sense of 'otherness' as Vikram notes:

Nyinyi wahindi wenye adabu, kwa kweli, lakini.... But now—sasa—it is done. Go. Tell your uncle to get on the plane and not do foolish things here in Kenya. (263-264)

This excerpt makes Vikram develop feelings of psychological dislocation for being depicted as the 'other' as he struggles to identify himself as a Kenyan citizen. Members of the Asian community are treated as aliens and this leads to psychological conflict in Vikram. It should be noted that dislocation and displacement are witnessed from two perspectives, the physical and psychological, Saha, (2015). It is in this regard that members of Vikram's community are treated uniquely and given connotations which depict them as different in the host country. Due to this, they are deprived of the essential needs of independence and freedom since they are politically disfranchised in the host community.

Psychological suffering is present in the minds of people in diaspora when they have that sense of belonging to no space or time, displaced by the alienation they face; they live in nowhere yet somewhere. They exist, in the parlance of Yahya *et al.*, in a continuum of discontinuity. This is captured by the phrase "there is no fixed home for those in the diaspora to belong to" (Yahya *et al.*, 2022). Salim in *The Gunny Sack* is convoluted by a fixed place to call. He is worried by constantly being referred to as Indian but he feels too like he is an Africa because he was born in Africa (233). In short, diaspora people are dislocated from a physical abode of their own identity and origin; they do not interact on a wholesomely free basis and this makes them feel disconnected from their native ancestral land. For instance, in *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall*, when Vikram's family is psychosocially affected by the atrocities committed by the Mau Mau, they migrate to Nairobi where they are welcomed by the narrator's close family members, Uncle Rakesh and his wife Shanti (95). This demonstrates that although members of the Asian community have the desire to maintain their social networks for psychological support system as diasporic citizens.

Accordingly, there is a need to identify the political changing landscape in the milieu of the diaspora emigrants' locations from a given country of origin. This brings into consideration the postcolonial theory which argues that the 'other' is "inferior, marginalized, subordinated and does not qualify to be included in the 'we' and as such, they feel psychologically dislocated (Shash, 2022). In *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall*, Vikram who is marginalized by the new Kenyan postcolonial decides to return from exile in Canada to Kenya his imagined place of origin. He was motivated by the new president's speech which reminded the public that the vigilante attacks on Asians who were viewed as marginalized and the 'other' would not be tolerated. (321) The political dilemma leads to emotional scars on members of the Asian community in East Africa who are regarded as not belonging to the new Kenya even if they were born in a country like Vikram.

De Bruyne (2020) observes the issue of migrants and the

challenges of adapting to new geographical locations based on fiction stories and how displacement from their native environments poses challenges to migrants. This by itself exemplifies the challenge of physical translocation to new areas and the effects of new climatic conditions that leave migrants feeling climatically displaced by the new geographical conditions of the new areas they are in. The case of Salim, in *The Gunny Sack*, narrates the geographical dislocation he experienced on his way to camp Uhuru. He goes through a torturous journey consumed by loneliness for forty-eight hours as he notes: “In forty-eight hours, I saw the vegetation change from the coastal coconut palms and sisal to the grassland and shrubbery of the plains and into the thick, tropical forest at the lake (221). The geographical dislocation complicates the sense of diasporic alienation, loss, loneliness and psychological dislocation of diasporic citizens. In this case, Salim is faced with the challenge of being uprooted from his home in Dar-es-Salam to alien land for his compulsory National Service training.

### 5. Dislocation of Memory

According to Ortner (2020) memory should not be inculcated into scholarly discourse as a biological capability of recollecting the past in our minds alone. According to her, it should encompass the concept of constructing the lived past and that information preserved and carried out by the functioning of social communities such as the family or state. There is a strong nexus between one’s point of origin in terms of ancestral heritage that results in the functioning of “place memory”, which has a strong bearing on the current lives of diaspora subjects (Sophia & Kaushal, 2020). For instance, In *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall* the narrator’s mother, Sheila has the urge to return to her ancestral home and had visited her homeland twice since her father’s death “Mother had visited her homeland twice since her father’s death...India was calling her, that she was ready to end her Africa sojourn...” (270) Sheila being situated as the ‘other’ in alien land concretizes the concept of “otherness” to come into play in her existence and this places memory to become the only living source of the remaining ‘primordial’ identity anchoring the characters to their ancestral lands in many instances.

The analysis of memory within the framing of dislocation in diasporic literature aims to explain the “contestation of memory in the contemporary era” within the fabric of the immigrants’ lived diasporic life (Heersmink & Sodaro, 2022). It deals with the information that they have stored in their minds and reproduces in the narrations. In *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall*, Vikram’s mind is dislocated by events which have been overtaken by time. From the photos of how the Bruce family was murdered, his memory is preoccupied with these events after several years. The narrator remembers: “...in the first one, Mr Bruce lies on the ground where he was shot...next picture boy’s headless body; third picture a girl in bed lying sideways...” (283). Vikram goes through an acute consciousness and concerns about the past and its recovery through memory and this permeates through the works of Moyez Vassanji. Besides this, the novel, *The Gunny Sack* is a

story that revolves around an old gunny sack reminisced through memories. These memories are painful histories and experiences of Asian immigrants in East Africa in the search for their identity. The narrator refers to it as a collection of a bad memory. He states:

The gunny would like to throw out one more bad memory. Spit out a pang of conscience that’s been eating away at the insides, like a particularly thorny pip that’s been swallowed. (85)

These histories are captured by different generations of Asians in East Africa who are depicted as trapped between totalitarian colonial rule and suppressed or oppressed African blacks. In the quest for identity and the paradox of being in an alien land, they navigate to strike a balance between the two extremes.

The sense of belonging as a concept is described as a “fundamentally temporal experience that is anchored not only in place but time” (May 2017). That sense of temporal location allows one to situate their environment into a specific psycho-social context within an aggregation of other individuals subscribing to the same social-cultural practices within a given locality. Secondly, this belonging in as much as it has this psycho-social context, it also has a sense of the need to belong to the past and the present based on the histories of a people. In *The Gunny Sack*, the Indians have experienced cycles of generational uprooting and homelessness in the past and configure their present and future sense of belonging. The narrator affirms that this must stop for the prosperity of the community “The running must stop now, Amina. The cycle of escape and rebirth, uprooting and regeneration, must cease in me.” (298). For diasporic individuals, this geographical belonging is distorted by the sense of “nostalgic belonging from afar,” a situation where the belonging is not situated in the milieu of the immediate surroundings but is a dislocation of memory. This historical sense of belonging therefore entrenches itself into the present realities of those in diaspora in a virtual sense without reference to the existing physical world of the past.

On the subject of intergenerational memory, Zorko (2020) focuses on intergenerational memory as narrated by their successive descendants in new areas. New generations of migrants inherit the narratives of their parents and identify with the histories, re-telling the stories as if they witnessed them. In *The Gunny Sack*, Salim Juma brings his childhood life into focus through memory. He remembers that his father Juma Husein died in Nairobi during the Mau Mau uprising against colonial rule. This death marks a dislocation of the existence of his father from the association of those who are still alive. The narrator unravels the struggle of the Asian community paralleled with the quest for African independence. It is through memory that the narrator exposes the mysteries of the gunny sack, Pandora’s box that enriched his past. In echoing the words of Ji Bai, the narrator sees the urge to revisit his past accounts: “There are those who go to their graves not knowing where they came from...who hurtled into future even as the present yet not over... for whom history was a contemptible record of a shameful past” (134).

Salim who carries a hybridized identity is burdened by the troubles of collecting consciousness and memory of Asians in East Africa. The relentless search for true identity and selfhood continues throughout his life and the generations. He has nagging feelings about his skin colour, dark complexion and his African name Salim Juma. He remembers his father's dark complexion that he has inherited ". . . the dark of the Indian, that persistent brown-dark of sedimented coffee that refuses to whiten with any amount of milk" (71). Alternatively, while on his way to Camp Uhuru for National service training in Northern Tanzania, he remembers the loneliness he experienced "How to explain the numbness, the loneliness, the total paralysis of memory..." (222). This captures the isolation and disconnects that the narrator endures as a diaspora citizen in alien land but they can be recollected through memory. (222)

### 6. Conclusion

This paper has explored dislocation as complex and crucial subjects that represent the literary changes taking place in the postcolonial East Africa. These changes have affected the socio-cultural situation of the Asians and the indigenous Africans. The paper has framed the precarious situations of Asians as dislocated diasporic subjects in the postcolonial period in the East Africa region. Because of their complex movement Asians beyond the borders of their homeland, they feel dislocated in the diaspora. Vassanji's postcolonial novels endeavour to explore the question of racial identity and dislocation created by discourses of colonial hegemony in the region.

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