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## Homeland: A Shifting Pendulum in M.G. Vassanji's *The Book of Secrets*

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### **Abstract:**

This paper aims to investigate the notion of homeland in M.G. Vassanji's novel 'The Book of Secrets'. The novel covers in the purview of its pseudo-historical narrative, the process of colonization resulting in the dispersal of the people away from their homeland followed by the eventual decolonization rendering many people homeless. 'Homeland' in this novel is looked upon as a mirage, much sought after by the characters in de-colonized Africa, some of whom accept the notion of world citizenship while some languish in a dilemma of claiming a space of their own. Indian immigrants in East Africa keep chasing the mirage of a homeland all their lives and it eludes them as they find themselves in the position of outsiders in newly independent African countries. The novel deals with the broader issue of how each of the characters arrives at a solution in their unique predicament. This paper attempts to analyze the shifting notion of homeland reflected in the novel from the perspective of diaspora theory.

**Keywords:** Homeland, diaspora, space, postcolonial, history.

### **Introduction:**

*The Book of Secrets* written by M.G. Vassanji in 1994 is set in East Africa partly of colonial and partly of postcolonial times. The narrator in the novel brings out the transformation in a place from its identity first as a German colony then as a British colony of Tanganyika till it became an independent nation of Tanzania. The historical events that change its matrix are seen from the focal point of Indian diasporic community whose status eventually dwindles in the new political setup and the question of homeland looms large before them. Most of the characters in the novel belong

to the merchant class whose forefathers had made their way to Africa in order to make their fortunes in the land that was ruled by the British while some were employed there in the colonial service. The narrative is triggered by the discovery of a diary of colonial civil servant A.D.C. Alfred Corbin, made by an Indian immigrant named Firoz who hands it over to his former history teacher Pius Fernandes for investigation. The diary that came in light in 1988 was written by its owner between 1913 and 1916 during the turbulent years of the First World War. The motive behind the investigation is to evaluate the commercial value of the document that served as a passage to the past but soon the narrator's personal involvement in digging out the past for better understanding shapes the endeavor from a public history to personal history. The transformation of the place is seen from the perspective of characters who had come to imagine the place as their homeland and suddenly were jolted out of their illusion when they were looked upon as outsiders in the newly independent nation. The decision of independent Tanzanian government of not allowing double citizenship to its citizens posed a question before many who were in a dilemma about making a choice.

### **Theoretical Framework:**

This paper aims to bring out the changing matrix of representation of places and also of identities of different social groups residing in East Africa with special reference to the British colony of Tanganyika which came to be known as the independent country Tanzania in 1961. How the change in political power structures affected the social spheres occupied by people has been gauged with the help of diaspora theory. Diaspora denotes the movement, migration, or scattering of a people away from an established or ancestral homeland. The etymological origins of the word trace back to the Greek word *diaspeirein*, meaning "to scatter or spread about (Oxford Dictionary)" However, 'di' as a prefix meaning 'two' also hints at the phenomenon of people occupying two spaces at a time; one where they are placed by chance and the other to which they emotionally associate themselves with and feel nostalgic about. Diaspora theories do often follow a set of shared assumptions about the usefulness of studying the impact of migration. Though the causes of the dispersal of diasporic communities and individuals vary, the term is appropriate in describing the struggles undertaken to uphold cultural affinities with a homeland (real or imagined) and to maintain narratives of dislocation from that homeland. These narratives and commonly shared cultural threads bind a homogeneous group into a diasporic community, the people of which

are often conscious about maintaining their cultural norms demonstrated through celebration of festivals or performance of certain rituals.

According to Homi Bhabha, “Being in the diaspora is probably a condition in which the immigrants occupy an interstitial space between the nation left behind and the nation where they reside.” (ctd. Karmakar 77-90) 'Home' involves commitment. It can either be with the place that one has left behind or with the place that one occupies. In many cases the ties that the immigrants have with their place of origin are fragile, reflected only in their traditions and way of life and not in any tangible notion of home awaiting their return in the homeland. In this case, they feel at home in their adopted land forming a group with fellow immigrants. They also make a new imaginative relationship with the world after losing familiar habitats. Their ‘otherness’ is however, highlighted through their adherence to a peculiar way of life in spite of being assimilated with the native culture. Salman Rushdie in his book *Imaginary Homelands* brings out the paradox of the condition of immigrants:

“To be a migrant is, perhaps, to be the only species of human being free of the shackles of nationalism. It is a burdensome freedom (Rushdie 124).”

How people shape the places and are in turn shaped by the places, how they gain experience of life through their encounter with different places; can be explored through diaspora theory that specializes in the issues related to dispersal of people from one place to another.

### **Diasporic Reading of Vassanji’s *The Book of Secrets*:**

M.G. Vassanji, son of expatriate Indians residing in the British colonies of East Africa, spent his childhood in Tanzania. The family was forced to migrate to Canada as a result of the strong growth of nationalism in the newly independent African country. Vassanji claims that the streets of Dar es Salaam, the capital of independent Tanzania often haunt his memories. In his writings he chooses to focus upon the expulsion of Indians from their adopted homeland Africa which was especially painful for the second generation immigrants who grew up imagining the place of their birth as their homeland. His novel, *The Book of Secrets* tries to bring out the angst experienced by different expatriates residing in Dar es Salaam in postcolonial times.

### **Home and Belongingness for Select Characters in *The Book of Secrets*:**

Migration had a long history in Africa though reasons for migration were different in pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial times. Roughly the migrants can be divided in three groups: namely- Indentured labourers, Gujarati traders and servicemen who joined imperial service in different capacities.

The narrator Pius Fernandes, originally a resident of Goa, erstwhile Portuguese colony in India; leaves for British colony of East Africa after being appointed there as a history teacher in 1950s. In independent Tanzania, he finds himself rootless when he loses his job as a result of forced retirement after the Boyschool where he served in Dar es Salaam; falls in the hands of new government and abruptly declares his retirement from the service. Over the years Pius had come to imagine Dar es Salaam as his hometown. Therefore, he chooses to spend his lonely years there instead of returning to decolonized Goa where his Portuguese identity would be an embarrassment. Pius' predicament is a glaring example of the impact of colonization and eventual decolonization on people at large as he is the man who is rendered homeless after the decolonization process in both the places- his real homeland Goa and his imagined homeland Dar es Salaam! He chooses to remain in Dar es Salaam and justifies his choice by saying, "This city where I first landed forty years ago has so grown on me, it is like an extension of my self. I will never shed it (Vassanji 295)." In his sense of loneliness and resultant depression, he sometimes ruminated how life would have been if he had chosen to leave Dar es Salaam, but an alternative to it did not occur to him even in his imagination.

The diary, given by his pupil Firoz, took Pius to the East Africa trapped between German and British colonies during the First World War. It presents the narratives of different people from diverse social groups such as- Mukhi Jamali whose parents residing in Lamu, upon the African continent traced their origins from Jamnagar located in the state of Gujarat in India. Jamali chanced to follow a British explorer to Kikono, a place which had not even flourished into a town back then. He decided to settle there because he fell in love with a local Swahili girl who had become a Christian convert. Later he married her and became the pioneer of Shamsi community in Kikono, established a mosque, united his own people and soon came to be known as Mukhi or the head of the community. He made his fortunes mainly in trade and commerce and developed a network among his own community members spread across different British as well as German colonies in

Africa. Later his inevitable movement from war-torn Kikono to Moshi, after the German colony was taken over by the British; resulted in dwindling of his former status and he died in Moshi a year later. His example makes us ponder how chance determines everything in one's life. Sudden outbreak of war changed the fate of Kikono as well as that of Mukhi Jamali who lost the opportunity of becoming mayor of the full-fledged town that he had pioneered!

The writer of the diary, A.D.C. Alfred Corbin was raised in places like Stockholm, Prague and Hamburg due to his father's career in the consular service. He had never really stayed in his actual homeland England and could not even speak his mother tongue fluently. Reportedly Corbin had chosen to serve the empire in African colonies with an idealistic notion of helping the natives and setting a good example of governance there. Immediately after his arrival in the wilderness of Africa at his post in Kikono, he voices his loneliness but soon gets involved in the lives of the Shamsi Muslim immigrants and finds a sense of belongingness. Later he spends his entire career serving in different colonies across Africa. At the time of his retirement and eventual return to his legitimate homeland England, his wife expresses a concern, "I wonder how we'll adapt to the little island after a lifetime of exile in the tropics (Vassanji 304)."

Another character Nurmohamed Pipa, born to a prostitute in Moshi, was simply described as an Indian. Later he affiliated himself with the Shamsi community as they accepted him within their folds and it is through the preaching in a Shamsi mosque at Dar es Salaam that he had learnt about the importance of home and belongingness. His sense of epiphany is expressed like this, "You have to belong somewhere, have a people (Vassanji 128)." His acceptance of Shamsi identity gives his mother at least some status though it is reported that to her the Muslim prayers sounded foreign though she dismissed all the questions of her actual origin. This shows how people can adopt identities for making their lives easier. The same was done by many African Swahili natives by getting converted into Christianity. Pipa was sent to Kikono by his godfather Jaffer bhai with a promise that he will get a suitable bride there. Pipa's subsequent marriage with Mariamu follows the trumpets of war and he, a man from enemy territory is bound to stay in Kikono with his new wife where he starts a shop of his own with the help of Mukhi Jamali. This shows us how people come to associate themselves with different spaces. During the turbulent period of war, Pipa is used as a messenger by both the parties involved in the fight: the Germans as well as the British. He, the common man is crushed by the cruelties of war and the final blow strikes on him when his

wife Mariamu is raped and murdered. Pipa remarries and then moves to the happening city of Dar es Salaam to start afresh and his business in spices prospers there. Years later, during the African movement for Independence he is once threatened by the leader of the freedom movement who says to him “You know, Pipa, come independence and we’ll send you back where you came from (Vassanji 260).” To which he promptly replies, “I come from Moshi. My mother and father-I don’t know where from. Many places perhaps. Where will you send me? Tell me so I can prepare.” His reply reveals the fact about most immigrants in Africa whose origins had become so obscure that they had nowhere to go. The struggle for acceptance in their adopted homeland was inevitable. In this context, ‘The word ‘immigrant’, rather than relating to an actual event of movement, becomes a euphemism for ‘not from this place’, or for ‘one who belongs somewhere else (Virinder S. Kalra 14).

The case of Pius’ colleague Mr.Gregory is yet different. He had left his homeland England in order to serve in a school at Dar es Salaam in Africa where his dedicated work earned him respect during the colonial rule. In fact, he, being a European was given privileges that were denied to Pius who was a brown man and was not deemed eligible for teaching English literature, the territory that was accessible only to Gregory! Declaration of Tanzania as an independent country led to Gregory’s downfall. At the time of deciding which citizenship to keep, Gregory addressed his thoughts to Pius, “I’ve lived here most of my life now, this is home. Besides, if something were to happen to me and I got kicked out, England, that bitch, would always accept me---but not you Pius. Wrong Colour (Vassanji 285). However, his decision of giving up his British citizenship in order to remain in Dar es Salaam, his imagined homeland; turned out to be a disaster as he had to die a lonely and obscure death in a place that had grown hostile to all the associations with colonial period. Gregory’s posthumously published collection of poems entitled *havin’ a Piece* intends to make a pun on the meaning of the name ‘Dar es Salaam’ as ‘heaven of peace’. In one of the poems entitled ‘Brown Man’ Gregory juxtaposes his existence on African soil with that of Pius’ and observes that the latter could endure there in sweet tan innocence while himself, soft like a larva withered in African heat (Vassanji 297). This situation, in which Pius is better adapted in Tanzania due to his brown complexion highlights the racial prejudice as a basis for acceptance in a place.

Shamsis belonging to second or third generation of immigrants, spoke the local language Swahili, sometimes opted to wear the native attire yet their ‘otherness’ could be seen in their way

of life. What set them apart were their festivals like *garba* that confirmed not only their ephemeral ties with homeland India, but also the fact of their being Hindus before their conversion in Islam. They can be seen as people who not only stuck to an adopted land but probably to an adopted religion as well. This fact about them is observed by Corbin while collecting information about them (Vassanji 40). This bond of common faith bound them together as a community. Celebration of dance and festivities, sharing of traditional cuisine prepared on such occasions by community members strengthened the bonds among them. Pipa's gesture of adopting Shamsi identity and his justification for doing so allegorically represents the entire community's decision of assuming a common identity and adhering to a particular lifestyle to bring homogeneity on the backdrop of hybridity.

### **Colonies and their Identities:**

Advent of colonialism in Africa as described by Vassanji in his novel *The Book of Secrets*; divided the East African region in British as well as German colonies. The native people Swahili, Taita, Somali and the likes lost their indigenous identities as people belonging to a homogeneous race, pledging loyalties to their own people. Instead, their loyalties with the respective colonies determined their side in the battles fought during the First World War between the German and British colonies of Africa. Indians, mostly comprising of the merchant class developed a stronghold on African economy which assured them special privileges during the colonial period. Later the same Indians who had formed the backbone of African economy were despised by the native Africans, their properties were claimed by the government and most of them were forced to migrate to countries like England or America. In Vassanji's novel, Pipa, a hardworking man, rises from his obscure origins as an Indian immigrant's son to become a wealthy merchant of Dar es Salaam. He supported the cause of Africa's freedom but yet was forced to part with his hard earned property in independent Tanzania.

During the colonial period, movement of people from one territory to another was mobilized by the fact that both the regions were under the control of British Empire. Some people were forced to migrate after being employed in services like that of railways or being used as coolies. Some willingly decided to explore the territories for the purpose of business as did most members of the Shamsi community in *The Book of Secrets*. The Shamsis had left their homeland Gujarat long back and had spent generations on the African soil moving from different colonies



occupied by the British as well as the Germans. The novel also explores how the character of a place changes when it is handed over from one colonizer to another. This happens when the African colony of Moshi is later captured by the British by the end of the First World War. Residents have to change their allegiance as soon as the rulers change and in the critical years of war people are forced to take sides and are at times pitted against their own people in order to serve the interests of the colonizers.

Imperial government needed manpower for the smooth conduct of their administrative work on the African soil. They also required skilled labour force. This was the initiation of influx of the Indians on the African continent. In July 1901, Harry Hamilton Johnston, British Commissioner to Uganda, declared East Africa to be “the America of the Hindu”. Eastern and Central Africa, he believed, were “suitable as a second home for the Indian race” because the climate, vegetation, and lingua franca “are so remarkably similar to those which prevail in India . . . the Indian scarcely feels in a strange land” (Aiyar 62). Here the word Hindu certainly stands for all the Indians who could easily make Africa their second home.

Indian merchants in East Africa had shared power with the British colonizers and therefore, after the decolonization, they became anathema in the country just as the people of British origin like Gregory lost their aura and died in obscurity. Everything associated with the Empire became a matter of embarrassment.

### **Rise of African Nationalism:**

‘A discourse of indigeneity captured by the slogan “Africa for Africans” resulted in a racialized definition of nationhood in Kenya. In this framing, Indians would never have a territorial claim to Kenya no matter how many generations had lived and died there (Aiyar 72).’ The Indian merchants who had been the backbone of African economy lost their place in the new formed nation Tanzania in 1961. They had already lost their homeland India when its boundaries were territorially fixed in 1947 after gaining the status of an independent nation.

“Indian citizenship was defined territorially and singularly in 1947. Jawaharlal Nehru urged over a million Indians living overseas at the time to consider their adopted host lands their “home”, making it clear that the diaspora belonged elsewhere and not in India. Yet he reminded

Indians that they were “guests of the Africans”, a trope picked up by nationalists in East Africa to emphasize the extent to which Indians were outsiders and did not belong there (qtd. Aiyar 63).

Anti-immigrant discourse prevailed in African states where Indians were perceived in the same light as British imperialists who had sidelined the natives from powerful positions. As described by Vassanji, Indians had always maintained a distance with the natives though they had maintained cordial relations with the colonizers. The County’s policy of single citizenship put them in a crux---returning to the homeland which they never had, moving to a neutral place where they could start from the scratch or to compromise with one’s own status in the adopted homeland Tanzania. Some people arrived at the golden mean of sending their children abroad for higher education with the expectation that they get settled there.

The former hierarchy, defining the nation was reversed as the British colonizers were out of context, Indian immigrants were grudgingly tolerated and natives who had woken up from the cultural amnesia enjoyed the topmost privileges. The change in power structures had its impact on people and places. Place names were also changed giving them a new identity, such as Kichwele Street was named Uhuru Street (‘Uhuru’ meaning Independence in local language). Thus the places as well as people underwent a thorough transformation as a result of decolonization. Mombasa, the happening port in colonial times gradually lost its importance and its place was taken by Dar es Salaam. German colonies changed their character in British occupation of them and further change took place when they became part of the independent Tanzania.

### **Conclusion:**

Salman Rushdie refers to the diasporic individual as a 'translated' individual. It is this translated self that urges the diasporic Indian writers to engage themselves with the idea of 'home' in their writings (Karmakar 77-90). Vassanji’s attempt of depicting Africa as an adopted homeland for many Indians is based upon his own experience as a second generation immigrant who had to bear the loss of his homeland. This diaspora discourse relieves the ‘displaced’ of their burden of memories and trauma of lacking the sense of belongingness. Most of the literature on the Indian diaspora usually traces the writer's journey from the ambiguity over 'home' to ancestral roots through the memory lane. (Karmakar 77-90). A parable of camel told by a preacher in the mosque is cited by Pipa to describe the absurdity of human condition--- ‘The blindfolded camel walks patiently and doggedly, persistent in the illusion that it had a destination.’ The camel had a sense

of arriving at his destination when the blindfolds were removed from his eyes. This allegory aptly sums up the human wanderings in search of a land that they can claim as their own!

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