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The Different Types of Ethnic Affiliation in M. G. Vassanji's *No New Land*

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Abstract

Establishing a sense of affiliation to ethnicity is one of the most controversial issues for people who are displaced in countries that are far away from their motherland. The colonisation of the British over Asia and Africa in the nineteenth century resulted in the mass movement of Indian workers from India to Africa. These workers were brought in to build railways that connected the British colonies in East Africa namely Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda. While the arrival of the Indian workers is considered as a kind of colonial practice, but their deportation in the post-independence years is seen as a part of decolonization. These Indians were forced to leave Africa as they were blamed for being non supportive of the Africans who were then engaged in armed struggles against the British colonialists. This study is based on the lives of these deported Indians as depicted in the novel titled *No New Land* by M.G. Vassanji. M.G. Vassanji is a Canadian novelist whose family was also deported from Dar Esslaam, Tanzania. He also describes how the Indian Shamses were strict in affiliating with the different social and cultural background they found in their new home, Canada. This research examines the theme of affiliation and the experiences of these migrants. This study will show that South Asians in Canada are strict in their affiliation to their ethnic values. Secondly, it will expose the three types of affiliation and finally show how the author deals with affiliation as a part of the community's ethnic record that must be documented.

Keywords: sense of affiliation, types of affiliation, colonization, displacement, discrimination, enclave, Indian Shamsi

"After all, we've brought India with us"

M.G. Vassanji

1. Introduction

Canada has a unique story in terms of geography and history. Geographically, this country is situated in the northern part of North America. It extends from North Pacific Ocean to the west and North Atlantic to the east. It is located between the Arctic Ocean to the north and USA to the south. The distance between the eastern and western parts in Canada is equal to the distance from London to Bombay. It is the world's second largest country after Russia. Historically, Canada is a small nation that is composed of Europeans who migrated there after the discovery of North America in the late 15th century. Besides these white people, Canada is also inhabited by Metis, Inuits, and several Native American groups. Before the coming of Europeans, these groups of people enjoyed living their own cultures and speaking their own languages. Things continued so until 1670 when the European "explorers" began to arrive. The Europeans, English and French in specific, have changed Canada a lot; they confiscated the land and imposed the European languages and culture on all people. In 1776, Canada was declared as a British colony with a province for French-speaking catholic Europeans called Quebec. The Canadians have chosen the way of negotiation with the British colonisers to get their independence. Under the North America Act 1867, the colony became a Dominion of Canada.

The Canadians continued to establish their own institutions, and the country was declared as an independent country in 1982. Canadians celebrate the first of July as a national day. Yet, the umbilical cord with London is not cut off completely. The Governor General, the first post in Canada, for example, is decided by the Queen of England for an unfixed period of time but in consultation with the Canadian Prime Minister. Canada has turned into a destination for people from every part of the world as the country was in dire need of workers. After WWII, the economic development necessities forced Canada to accept huge waves of immigrants from non-European countries. Immigrants from South Asia (Indians) are the largest ethnic minority in Canada. The arrival of the South Asians, the immigrants from the sub-continent India, began at the end of the nineteenth century when the British colonisers planned to tighten their grip on East Africa by constructing a network of railway tracks that connected all their colonies in Africa. For this construction, about 32 000 indentured workers were taken from the Indian sub-continent. These people had to work under harsh conditions that brought death to many of them. Once the railway projects had been completed in 1901, the Indians returned but about 7000 workers decided to stay back in Africa and establish their own business. They had been greatly successful in business. Some educated South Asians also occupied good positions in the management of the colonial and private institutions at the expense of the Africans who were engaged in a fierce fighting against the colonisers for independence. In the post-independence era, the new African military rulers adopted the policy of 'Africanisation' in the 1970s. Under this policy, South Asians were stripped off their properties and were forced to leave Africa. Some of them were allowed to leave with only a small sum of pocket money. Some of the deported preferred not to return to the Indian sub-continent which was then struck by poverty and political tension. Instead, they preferred to go to the United Kingdom. However, those who failed to go to United Kingdom, made their way to North America, Canada and USA. The deported South Asians were different in culture and religion in specific. Among the deported is a group known as the *Shamsi*. Descended from Ismaili section, *Shamses* are Muslims in religion, yet they have their own religious particularities. The author of the novel selected for this study belongs to this group. The experiences of South Asian immigrants in Africa, who made their way to Canada, remained undocumented in their country of origin, India or the countries of citizenship in Africa or later in Canada. This sharpens the pen of the author M. G. Vassanji to document these untold experiences of his people. Moyez Gulamhussein Vassanji who is also known as M. G. Vassanji, is a contemporary Canadian writer. He was born in Nairobi, Kenya in 1950. After the death of his father, Vassanji moved along with his family, to Dar Esslaam, Tanzania. In 1970, Vassanji obtained a scholarship to pursue his study in nuclear engineering in the USA. He started his literary writing in 1982 as a founder and editor of *The Toronto South Asian Review*. To date, he has written seven novels with two collections of short stories. He devotes his writings to document the experiences of his ethnic people in exile, a phenomenon that colours the writings of immigrant authors in Canada. Racism, identity crisis, and displacement are among the themes that dominate Vassanji's writings. This study examines the novel titled *No New Land* (1991) by M. G. Vassanji. It explores three kinds of interrelated affiliations: residential, religious and social. The theme of affiliation is traced through the story of a Muslim Indian family that arrives at Toronto. They are Nuridin Lalani and Zera, his wife, along with Fatima and Hanif, their two children. This study will show that South Asians in Canada are strict in their affiliation to their ethnic values. Secondly, it will expose the three types of affiliation and finally show how the author Vassanji deals with affiliation as a part of the community's ethnic record that must be documented.

2. The Different Types of Ethnic Affiliation in M. G. Vassanji's *No New Land*

"Ethnic affiliation" is a term that is used to describe the state in which a person, or more, is connected to a large social group of people who bear the same or similar racial and/or cultural traits. In immigrant literature, affiliation becomes an immigrant's concern to establish, perpetuate or restore an intimate effective relationship with his community. David McClelland, a psychologist, understands affiliation as a need. He describes affiliation as a person's need to have a sense that he is part of a social group (McClelland, 2010). According to Mani, the demonstration of belongingness is an emotional self defence mechanism which prevails involuntarily among the displaced people. It is a mechanism that enhances self esteem and camouflages the emotional scars that comes together with any form of displacement (Mani, 2016, p 152). The Post-colonial theory primarily discusses the relationship between the European majority as colonizers and the minorities of colour as the colonised in Western counties. Yet, the theory does not ignore the significance of the ethnic connection between the immigrants and their respective communities on the grounds that the immigrants' experience, as a whole, is an experience of a community and not individuals. Homi Bhabha, a Post-colonial theorist, uses the term "affiliative solidarity" as he examines the experience of immigrants from the ex-colonies in Western countries (Bhabha, 1994, p. 230). "Ambivalent affiliation" is used, as a title for an article, by Amin Malak to refer to a position where the immigrant is exposed to two conflicting cultures of belonging: that of the native country and that of the host country (Malak, 1994, p 277). Sean Hier and Singh Bolario who examine the effects of racism on immigrants in Canada, describe "religious affiliation" as an "important social indicators" in an immigrant's life (Hier&Bolario, 2012, p. 171-72). The connection between the immigrants and their ethnic communities is significant in Post-colonial literature because this connection reflects the immigrants' sense of belonging to the countries they have emigrated from. Moreover, this connection is essentially required for the immigrants who need to create a new sense of their identity in exile. Whereas, the lack of this connection causes problems to the immigrants in exile (Birbalsingh, 1992). In other words, there looms a danger that once the immigrant stays away from his community, he loses his ethnic individuality. The sense of ethnic affiliation is a prominent theme in Vassanji's writings because *Shamses*, the author's ethnic people, seek distinction not only from the white Canadians but also from the other Indian communities including the Indian Muslims. One of the fields of distinction is that the sense of affiliation among Shamsi individuals is felt much greater than that in any other ethnic minority. Vassanji's novels are projected to let every character articulate that affiliation. In

his first novel *The Gunny Sack* (1989), the author presents an Indian Shamsi mother who advises her son who is leaving to overseas for settlement by saying "Don't marry a white girl...don't smoke or drink, Don't eat pork. Don't turn your back on your faith and your community" (Vassanji, 1989, p. 235). In other words, the mother advises her son to stick to his own people in exile because it is the only way to keep him purely Indian, and to avoid any hybrid of race and culture. Vassanji's writings on Shamsi experiences in Africa and Canada reflect the writer's desire to let everyone know the history and culture of his people. His fiction is designed to create a contextual record of his people, a record in which every single piece of history scattered throughout different places in three continents, Asia, Africa and North America is collected and registered. For him, telling the truth of unknown events and people is a responsibility, especially, when "the truth was known to the few and not the many..."(Vassanji, 1991, p. 14). In this regard, the author's responsibility is not only to document the stories of his people but also to make them accessible for both the white majority and the successive generations of the ethnic community itself. As for the author and his accomplishments, M. G. Vassanji's writings has received considerable attention from literary institutions. This is reflected in the prizes that Vassanji has received, such as Commonwealth Writers Prize in 1990, Harbourfront Festival Prize (1994), Giller Prize (1994), The Governor General's Prize in 2009.Vassanji is described as the "most promising novelist" in South Asian community (Birbalsingh,1992, p.102).

As for "South Asian Canadians", it is a term used to describe the immigrants who come from the Indian sub-continent. It is used to avoid confusion with the one group of Native American who are locally called Indians. South Asians are immigrants from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Nepal. They are one of the most influential minorities, with an average of five percent of the whole population in Canada. The diversity within this community in terms of languages, life styles, religion become a material for unique literary works and Vassanji's fictions are among these works.

2.1 Residential Affiliation

Living in an ethnic enclave is one of the main strategies that is used in fiction to express immigrants' sense of affiliation. As a concept, enclave is identified as "an area of a country or city where the people have a different religion, culture...from those who live in the country or city that surrounds it" (Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 2010, p. 501).For immigrants, settling in an area that is not different to their cultural environment back home gives them a feeling of safety and security. Indeed, enclave occupies a good space in Post-colonial literature because it represents a kind of ethnic immigrants' resistance against being integrated into the majority. As a protecting measure, some groups of immigrants seek to isolate themselves in an enclave to decrease the cultural effects of a majority who is different in race and culture. This is what happens with the immigrant characters in *No New Land* (1991) by M. G. Vassanji. A few days after their arrival at Toronto, the Lalani family chooses to settle at Don Mills in Sixty-nine Rosecliffe, a building which has twenty floors where two hundred and forty South Asian families crammed in. Most of them are Indians. The very act of choosing Sixty-nine Rosecliffe ethnic residential building by the Lalanis indicates the desire of this family to isolate themselves from the majority and be a part of the ethnic South Asian present in Canada. Food emerges as another way to establish one's sense of affiliation. In immigrant literature, food is not only a source of nutrition; it is also a way to reflect one's culture and identity. This meaning could be found in the well-known expression, "you are what you eat". In *No New Land* (1991), food is projected to play an important role in setting up and developing an enclave. Whether eating or cooking, ethnic food becomes a strong sign of affiliation. In an enclave that bears the name of Sixty-nine Rosecliffe, the character's sense of affiliation is established in different ways. Gulshan Bai, for example, obliges herself to prepare the ethnic "tiffin", a meal cooked every day on the sixth floor. Meanwhile, Sheru Mama, on the fourteenth floor, has to toil every day to make sure that the popular "chappati" food is available for sale on a large scale. Ram Deen and his daughter have to satisfy the ethnic demand of "halal meat"(62). In another form of affiliation, the families of the eighteenth floor are ethnically committed to provide "an open house" (63) every Saturday where ethnic individuals meet to discuss their problems and enjoy listening to the latest news from the country of origin. Moreover, babysitters are available in every floor to make sure that the new generation is fed with basic ethnic education prior to the age of going to public schools. In short, the very place of Sixty-nine Rosecliffe becomes a "world" that is closer to the sub-continent India rather than to Canada in terms of culture.

2.2 Religious affiliation

The experiences of immigrant community in exile show that ethnicity and religion are intertwined. It means that religion and culture contribute to give an ethnic immigrant a distinctive identity. What distinguishes the ethnic groups from the European majority is not only a difference in culture but a difference in religion as well. Thus, one can use religion to establish his sense of affiliation to his community. Vassanji is inclined to give his characters, whether Muslims or otherwise, a chance to establish affiliation to his community religiously. *No New Land* (1991) is no exception. It introduces the ethnic South Asian Muslims as individuals of strict commitment to their religious and spiritual values. In Sixty-nine Rosecliffe, the ethnic families, for example, show various forms of religious affiliation. They send their children on evenings to the fourteenth floor where a "Quran class" (64) is arranged. The female children there are seen wearing *hijab*, head cover and their bodies being covered to ankles. In an inviting sense, religion seems to encourage friendship and human communication among ethnic individuals. For ethnic adults, their commitment to religion turns "a school gym on Elington Avenue" (68) into a mosque on weekend evenings. For prayers, people arrive in small groups with "soaring" spirits. After praying, *muhki*, the chief of the session, appears sitting and listening to the questions of the believers. Here, a chance is given to the newcomers to introduce themselves. Nurdin's wife, Zera is suggested to be "very pious [and] very religious"(138). Zera is exemplified as a character who subjects all human

experiences to the perspective of religion. When the argument of wearing pants among Indian ethnic women started, Zera immediately writes to the Master, her religious teacher in Dar Essalaam to solve the problem. She asks him whether Indian Muslim ladies in Canada have the right to wear pants. The Master's permissive "verdict" that ["If you wear pants, cover your behinds"] (67) becomes obligatory for Zera and other ladies. Later, Zera, along with other immigrant Indian ladies send "an ardent request" (67) to the Master "begging him to emigrate" (67) to Canada. The ladies address the master, "we are desperate for guidance…Life here [in Canada] is full of pitfalls…Children come home from school with questions we can't answer…Please come" (68).The very act of subjecting experiences to the vision and authority of a Muslim clergyman is another evidence of their commitment to religion. Yet, Zera's affiliation to the religion of Islam is questioned when it comes to her relationship with her husband, Nurdin. She is shown to avoid to sexual commitment to her husband. The reason is obvious. The Indian Muslim culture, in general, is a patriarchal culture where the husband takes the responsibility for satisfying the material needs of the family. In turn, he has absolute authority over his wife. When it comes to the Lalanis in Canada, they realize that their culture is in trouble. It so happens that Zera has shortly found a job because "the women are always in demand" (44). Unfortunately, Nurdin remains unemployed. Thus, Zera becomes the "breadwinner" of the family. The novel shows that employment empowers Zera at the expense of the manly role of Nurdin in the family. Zera is seen literally breaking one of the essential values of her religion by failing to satisfy her husband's sexual needs: "they had not been physically really close for years—No[r] had sex" (139). His desire for her never wavers. He notices that her "breasts were still ripe mangoes and the large hips were yet firm" (138). Zera's sexual non-commitment to her husband is felt by those outside her family circle. Romesh is a close friend of Nurdin. After paying his first visit to the Lalanis, Romesh tells Nurdin "that big wife of yours [is] not letting you have it"(139). The missionary who solemnised Zera and Nurdin's marriage in Dar Essalaam seems to say the same thing. During his four weeks' stay with the Lalanis, the missionary observes that Zera ignores Nurdin. One night, Zera and Nurdin get out of the kitchen carrying two cups of tea. When Zera presents the cup to the missionary, the latter remarks that, "I will have tea only from my wife's hand. This cup, you give [it] to Nurdin there" (192). It is "a significant lesson for Zera" (192) from the missionary who plans to bring her closer to her husband. In short, the experience of living in a Western country does not help an ethnic character to keep his/her culture of origin. Similarly, Nurdin himself fails to keep adherence to the religious rules of his community. This failure, as the novel suggests, is attributed to the fact that he is depressed by the host country which left him jobless before his wife has marginalised him in his family. Romesh, Nurdin's close friend, who is trying to take him out of the family circle which depressed him, throws him into a world of dis-adherence. Now, Nurdin tastes pork meat and drinks beer and is ready to go to "peep show"(165), things which Indian Muslims are absolutely not allowed to do.

2.3 Social Affiliation

In immigrant literature, characters are presented to prefer intra-ethnic friendship and marriage over inter-ethnic ones. In South Asian Canadian literature, issues such friendship and marriage are taken seriously. In *No New Land* (1991), the author, Vassanji decides on his characters' sense of affiliation through their friendships and marriages. As for friendships, the novel portrays the friendship between two persons, or more, who descend from the same ethnic community as a sign of ethnic affiliation. A sense of ethnic solidarity brings people who are different in their education, age and social background into friendship. The novel projects the reality of the guests through the character, Nanji. He is introduced to the Lalani family and he becomes a close friend to Nurdin Lalani and his wife Zera though he is superior to them in education. Nanji is a university professor working at Wordsworth College, while Nurdin at the time having no degree and is searching for a position as a shopkeeper. Zera, his wife, has no professional education. At best, she has worked as a receptionist to a Chinese doctor. This ethnic friendship turns into a source of mutual responsibility and a way to make sense of the others' needs. In the first meeting between Nanji and Nurdin's family, Zera offers Nanji assistance to find him a good girl as a wife. Nanji, in turn, has to take care of the family's children, namely Fatima and Hanif. Despite the age gap, between Nurdin's children and Nanji, they love Nanji and look at him as a "hero" for his academic success. Nanji tries to develop the children's education. He takes them, for example, "to the library and the Science Centre"(80). Professor Nanji has to sacrifice a lot of time to make sure that these children grow up properly in Canada. This could be interpreted as a part of his ethnic affiliation to this family. Nanji is narratively presented as a model Indian character who is making good progress in Canada. As a university professor, Nanji is a source of inspiration for the younger generation of the community. He is, as the novel shows, faithful to the others in the community. Yet, Nanji's affiliation becomes uncertain when it comes to his story with Esmail. After finishing his teaching at Wordsworth College, Nanji takes an evening train at station in St. George Street. On the platform, he looks from distance at Esmail, an ethnic friend, who is in "Kaunda suit", an ethnic wear. Nanji prefers not to approach Esmail because he does not want to draw the attention of a racist gang of three men who are on the platform searching for a new victim. Suddenly, they attack Esmail, whose cries for help is clearly heard. People crowd and policemen immediately come. Nanji is taken by surprise, and he unconsciously stays away. When he comes back home, he weeps "tears of regret, of shame, of hopelessness" (97). Deep down in his heart, he feels that he betrayed a social principle—that of defending his fellow country man. The real pain for Nanji is that he fails to live up to the rules of his community. In other words, he is unable to confirm his identity as a man faithful to his own people. The novel also suggests that the ethnic Indian Muslims in Canada are acquainted with the others on ethnic background rather than on a social one. The image of two ethnic acquaintances who have different social backgrounds is manifested in the story of Jamal and Abdul. Jamal is the son of "mathematics teacher" (72) and a lawyer with a Cambridge certificate. In Dar, he has worked as a "constitutional expert in the government" (72). When emigrated to Canada, Jamal is so fast in making progress as a lawyer and immigration agent earning a lot of money. In contrast, Abdul seems to have no education and

his social record shows that, in Dar, he has been working as the "head mechanic at Datsun" company (37). In Canada, Abdul becomes "a mechanic's assistant and gas pump attendant" (37). Abdul's wife, Roshana, is a factory labourer. In Dar, people like Abdul and Roshana knew Jamal "vaguely by face and mostly by reputation" (58). Once they are in Toronto "they would come to know him better" (58). This suggests that living in exile brings people of a certain ethnic group closer and discounts social status. It is another picture of ethnic affiliation. Vassanji also suggests that intra-ethnic marriage is a form of ethnic affiliation. Individuals are encouraged to choose their spouses from their own ethnic community. Such commitment is embodied in the story of Nanji and Khadija whose father is a missionary. Several days after her arrival to Canada with her father, Khadija (her name often recurs throughout the novel in a shortened form as Kati) is attracted to Nanji. Kati's attraction becomes a source of happiness to Nanji's friends such as Jamal and Zera and to her father. One day, Nanji is seen holding Kati's hand while they are on their way to the cinema along with Fatima and Hanif. The missionary, Kati's father, lightly rebukes Nanji: "What's this I hear that you've been holding my daughter's hand" (200). The embarrassment ends with Nanji responding with "a marriage proposal". In a sense that emphasises total surrender to ethnic rules, Kati's father announces that "it is our custom not to prolong engagements". And "Nanji could not argue" (201). As marriage is used by Nanji to increase his sense of affiliation, marriage works differently with Jamal. As narratively shown, Jamal is close to every family in the community. He is the immigration agent who facilitates the arrival of the relatives of these families. As a lawyer, Jamal defends the South Asians who unconsciously break the Canadian law. Yet, his marriage to a Canadian girl of English origin, Nancy, creates a gap between him and his ethnic people. His marriage represents an attempt to "escape" the ethnic "dead" world of Rosecliffe and assume another "bigger" world. For Nanji, this marriage is risky: "Jamal was going into the world to conquer it, and conquer it he would if he played his card right and did not fall" (115). Jamal's marriage to Nancy demonstrates how a marriage to a European spouse weakens the ethnic individual's sense of affiliation with his people. Jamal's marriage is perceived as a part of his superiority. The gap between Jamal and the residents of Rosecliffe is felt in the wedding celebration. In that celebration, his ethnic people were not given any priority. On the contrary, they are "thrown with people they could not relate to" (Ibid). Moreover, Jamal is also blamed that "no more did he tolerate the old familiarity, the tea-shop mode of greeting" (Ibid). In fact, the ethnic community of Rosecliffe "had never forgiven his wedding reception". As a result of this marriage, Jamal is derived from keeping contact with some of his well-liked friends like Nanji. Sometime later, when Jamal and his white wife pay a visit to Rosecliffe, he is not received warmly, except by Nanji. When Chacha enters the open house in Rosecliffe carrying tea and *samosas*, the man begins to serve the men but ignores Jamal who protests, "Eh, Chacha, what about me" (160). After gazing at him, Chacha apologises saying "but we thought...Oh sorry then" (160). This speech reflects a widespread and pre-conceived idea among Rosecliffe residents that Jamal has lost his cultural identity as a South Asian because of his marriage to the white Nancy. In a relevant sense, marriage is viewed as a matter of ethnic affiliation which is strengthened with the story of the Missionary's son. When the son decides to marry his American girlfriend, his father becomes angry because this decision is considered as a clear violation to South Asian social ethnic rules. As a result, "father and son had not exchanged a word for some years now"(191).

3. Conclusion

M. G. Vassanji raises some questions and reconsiders some issues through the events and characters in his first novel *No New Land*. The following are some of these issues. Ethnic affiliation is a source of power for the immigrants in exile. Once, he/she lives in his/her ethnic community, the immigrant is given a chance to keep his/her identity and practice his/her culture. Moreover, community life may give the immigrant an economic independence; it gives him/her a chance to establish his/her own business, a chance that may protect one against the racism of the majority in terms of employment. Adversely, ethnic affiliation could be a reason to create a gap between the immigrant and the people of the majority. This gap widens with the passage of time. The linguistic inability is an essential sign of this gap. Zera, for example, works as a receptionist at a clinic. Her inability to communicate well in English becomes a reason to lose her job. In other words, the ethnic life of the enclave does not help the immigrant to develop his foreign language proficiency (a proficiency which becomes an excuse for discrimination against the immigrants in employment). Ethnic affiliation may also have an adverse effect on the immigrant when it turns into a barrier which denies him/her access to cultures of other people. For example, Nurdin finds a girl crying on the ground, he approaches her to ask whether she needs help. The girl does not answer. As Nurdin repeats his question with sympathy, he puts his hand on her back waiting for her answer. The girl suddenly starts screaming accusing Nurdin of trying to rape her. The issue is reported to the police. The problem with Nurdin is that his life in ethnic enclave does not give him a chance to understand the culture of other Canadians and help him behave accordingly. Affiliation may bring readers into a conclusion that the individual experience of an immigrant should be examined within, not outside, the contextual record of his ethnic community. The studies that have, so far been conducted on immigrant experiences in exile look at those experiences as issues of community not issues of individuals. Thus, the community itself is the focus. The novel is concluded by suggesting that the immigrant's association to the land of origin is of two types; the first is a sense of longing/belonging to the native countries. The second is an affiliation to his/her ethnic community in exile. Such affiliation is not merely a sense, for the immigrant is expected to show it in daily life as shown in *No New Land*.

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