

**“With this past before you,  
all around you”:  
On the Transformation of Identities in  
M. G. Vassanji’s *No New Land*✦**

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**ABSTRACT**

This essay analyses how M. G. Vassanji’s second novel *No New Land* (1991), which thematises how Tanzanians of Indian origin emigrate to Canada in the nineteen-seventies and seek to build their new life there, explores the effects of diasporic double dislocation. It considers how the novel’s thematisation of diasporic double dislocation illuminates the possibilities and limitations of cross-cultural dynamics. For the purpose, it first examines how the characters identify themselves with East Africa and how the drastic changes caused by decolonisation lead to their sense of diasporic dislocation. It then analyses how their new life in Canada makes them feel further alienated and how they seek to cope with this additional sense of dislocation. Next, the essay considers how Vassanji explores another dimension of diasporic dislocation by making some characters seek to re-define their cultural and communal identity. It concludes by examining the ambivalence of the novel’s conclusion in light of Vassanji’s own oscillation concerning his cultural position as a postcolonial writer. The novel’s ending in which communal unity eventually stifles individual freedom, the essay concludes, reflects the writer’s increasing belief in the possibilities of cross-cultural transformation.

**KEYWORDS:** *No New Land*, M. G. Vassanji, diaspora, dislocation, ethnicity, cross-cultural transformation

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M. G. Vassanji's second novel *No New Land* (1991), which charts how Tanzanians of Indian origin emigrate to Canada in the nineteen-seventies and seek to build their new life there, is regarded as a relatively minor work within his oeuvre. In his overview of the writer's works, for instance, John Clement Ball considers that its slimness might indicate that the writer has not found many literary inspirations in his chosen homeland (262). Laura Moss even regards the novel as Vassanji's weakest work in that "it follows a rather formulaic engagement with 'immigrant issues'" (69-70). It is certainly true that his novels set in East Africa tend to be more highly acclaimed than those set in North America, including *No New Land*. According to Neil Ten Kortenaar, this tendency is particularly noticeable in Canada, where general readers seem to "prefer the transnational, set elsewhere, to the subnational" (566). It is telling that *The Book of Secrets* (1994) and *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall* (2003), each of which brought him Canada's prestigious Giller Prize, are set in East Africa.

However, if the reception of Vassanji's works has been partially influenced by the trend in Canada's multiculturalism, it is probably worth re-evaluating *No New Land* now in light of the writer's deepening interest in the politics and poetics of diaspora. While he explores various facets of diasporic identity by putting his characters in different historical and cultural settings, the significance of *No New Land* lies in its specific focus upon some effects of what Vijay Mishra calls "twice-displaced diaspora" (156). In this respect alone, *No New Land* is more than "a rather formulaic engagement with 'immigrant issues'" as such.

In Mishra's view, because of their enormous historical and cultural complexities, "[t]he 'twice-displaced' challenge theories of diaspora which fail to consider the 'differential' and uneven experiences of migration" (158). In other words, tales of double diasporic dislocation require readers to consider their particularities. To put it more concretely, most of Vassanji's novels set in East Africa highlight difficulties for Asian African characters in making it their true home in the turbulent colonial and post-colonial histories of the region, and thereby critically explore the possibilities and limitations of cross-cultural interaction and transformation they inevitably go through. In these novels, some characters do arrive in Canada after fleeing from their African "homes," where African nationalism marginalises them to the extent that their physical safety becomes uncertain. A typical example is *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall*,

in which the eponymous protagonist, a third-generation Asian Kenyan, nostalgically recalls his life in East Africa while hiding himself in Canada after being accused of large-scale corruption. Nevertheless, in this work, Canada mostly remains a backdrop. As Robert Zacharias points out, *The In-Between World* strategically evokes an “empty Canada” in order to highlight how haunting his African past is for the eponymous protagonist (217). In contrast, *No New Land*, Vassanji’s only novel set in Canada thus far, presents evocative portraits of Asian African immigrants and their community, and scrutinises how their identities are further transformed in the long process in which they try to make Canada their new “home” after leaving their African “homeland.” If Vassanji’s “African” novels highlight the tension between the Asian Africans’ attempt to maintain their original identity in their adopted homeland and its inevitable hybridisation triggered by cross-cultural and cross-racial contact (Simatei, “Voyaging” 29), the importance of *No New Land* lies in its careful exploration of how such dynamics of diasporic experience is further complicated by double geo-cultural dislocation. This essay therefore seeks to examine how the novel thematises the transformation of identities in the context of the characters’ double diasporic dislocation.

To explore this issue, among the analyses of *No New Land* offered by various scholars, Vera Alexander’s and Tina Steiner’s essays are particularly helpful. Reading the novel as highlighting the process of settling down, Alexander examines how “the problem of individuality” is in tension with “the collective phenomenon of the diasporic pattern of identification” (201). Steiner analyses how Vassanji’s *No New Land* and *Amriika* (1999), another novel set in North America, differently thematise “the ambivalent processes of negotiating transcultural identity” by focusing upon the tension between “the boundary markers of the security of the diasporic community (the original homeland community) on the other hand and integration and new affiliations to communities in the host countries on the other” (459). While Alexander’s and Steiner’s discussions on the role of the community are very helpful in developing my analysis on the transformation of cultural identities, writing in the first half of the noughties, neither of them considers how the novel examines the effects of double diasporic dislocation. Through an examination of how double diasporic dislocation affects the characters’ sense of belonging, this essay seeks to complement the existing readings of Vassanji’s *No New Land* and thereby contribute to the criticism on this increasingly important writer.

For the purpose, my essay first examines the characters' sense of cultural belonging in Tanzania. Their sense of dislocation, it argues, is a by-product of their hybridised identity. It then analyses their sense of further dislocation in Canada, their new host country. This part of the essay also examines how Vassanji sympathetically, but at the same time critically, examines the immigrants' attempts to cope with their diasporic dislocation. The third section of the essay discusses how some characters actively seek to transform their cultural identity and how their efforts are related to their sense of belonging to the community. It also demonstrates the extent to which the community conditions the protagonist's thinking and behaviour. Finally, my essay considers the novel's ending in light of an ambivalence that Vassanji showed concerning his own cultural position as a postcolonial writer at the early stage of his distinguished literary career. Referring to some of Vassanji's self-reflexive statements, the essay seeks to contextualise the novel's ambivalence.

## **I. Sense of Belonging and Dislocation in Africa**

*No New Land* opens with a scene where the main character Nurdin Lalani, whose family moved from Dar es Salaam to Canada seven years before, tiredly comes home after being falsely accused of sexually assaulting a young white woman patient at Ontario Addiction Centre where he works as a general purpose assistant. The story then immediately shifts back to his earlier life in Tanzania. The narrator justifies this move on the grounds that “[w]e are but creatures of our origins, and however stalwartly we march forward, paving new roads, seeking new worlds, the ghosts from our pasts stand not far behind and are not easily shaken off” (Vassanji, *No New Land* 9). As this passage clearly indicates, one of the thematic focuses of the novel is how the characters' past haunts, and to some extent even determines, their new life in Canada, despite the cultural transformations they go through. In order to understand how the past influences the present, it is necessary to examine their earlier experience in East Africa.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Nurdin's father Haji Lalani moves from India to Tanganyika, a then German colony that is to be handed over to Britain after World War I. He works in a well-known Indian company, and eventually starts his own shop. He is from an Indian Muslim group called the Shamsis, which is “somewhat unorthodox, hence insecure” (Vassanji, *No*

*New Land* 13) and partly for this reason maintains a tightly-knit and self-contained community.<sup>1</sup> His life unfolds almost exclusively within the Shamsi exclave. For instance, it is with the help of the community elders that Haji Lalani finds his wife. It is also significant that he repays their support by becoming head of their mosque, in that the institution “enables a re-enactment of Asian identity and is therefore the symbolic link with mother India” (Simatei, “Voyaging” 35). The religion functions as a strong boundary marker between insiders and outsiders (Alexander 215) and therefore constitutes the most essential component of the Shamsis’ communal and cultural identity. Proud of his role as a stern keeper of the community’s traditions, Haji Lalani confidently believes that they have “brought India” with them (Vassanji, *No New Land* 30). While he and his old friend Missionary, the community’s religious leader, are acclimatised to Africa to the extent that the nostalgic desire to return to their native land has almost disappeared (10), they do not doubt their identity as Shamsis. Even if a sense of geographical belonging becomes tenuous after their long sojourn in Africa, their communal identity does not seem to be shaken.<sup>2</sup> In the novel, the very fact that they hardly harbour nostalgia for India points to the stability of their communal identity.

In contrast, it does not seem that the African-born Nurdin feels a particularly strong sense of belonging to the Shamsi community. He merely thinks that he has little choice but to obey its rules, partly because he is diffident and very afraid of the draconian disposition of his father, who for him symbolises the communal authority. For Nurdin, he is “God’s personal executioner” (Vassanji, *No New Land* 146). Just as was the case with his father, Nurdin’s marriage is arranged by the community leader, but whereas Haji Lalani of his own accord asked the community elders to find a bride for him,

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<sup>1</sup> In his early works, Vassanji keeps on thematising the diasporic identity of the Shamsis, who his debut work explains are the descendants of those who “converted to an esoteric sect of Islam that considered thundering Allah as simply a form of reposing Vishnu” (*Gunny Sack* 7). The Shamsis are a fictionalised version of Ismaili Khojas, a group of Indian Muslims who converted from Hinduism in the fourteenth century, to which Vassanji himself belongs. Nonetheless, it is only in his *A Place Within: Rediscovering India*, the writer’s first travel book published in 2008, that he explores in detail the religious and cultural distinctiveness of Ismaili Khojas. This may be because he had been relatively ignorant of his own cultural background before his first visit to the land of his origin in 1993 (*Place Within* 3). Perhaps for this reason, Vassanji’s early writings hardly explore the Shamsis’ connections with India, or the effects of their religious heterogeneity on their diasporic experience in East Africa or North America.

<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, Vassanji also implies the impossibility of keeping the communal identity intact; the narrator casually mentions that Nurdin’s wife Zera has a half-sister whose mother is a black African (*No New Land* 57). The existence of cross-racial relationship implies that the communal boundary is not as rigid as it at first seems.

Nurdin passively consents, even though Zera, the chosen wife-to-be, is far from his ideal girl (20). His bond with the community is thus weaker, but partly for this very reason he seems to be more open to cross-cultural and cross-racial experience. Once he starts working as a sales agent of a shoe company, he greatly enjoys travelling around Central Province. He also develops a friendship with his African assistant Charles and learns some African manners (27). Later in Canada, he fondly recalls the landscape of East Africa and his African friend, even though to look back nostalgically is “positively uncouth” among the relocated Shamsis who eagerly seek to build a new life (170). Observing that Nurdin’s sentimental recollection is mostly about his life in the Shamsi community in Tanzania, not the country’s wider realities, Dan Ojwang rightly points out the serious limitation of cross-cultural interactions between the Asian Africans and black Africans (82). Nevertheless, it is equally significant that Nurdin does feel attached to the place and his African friend, because this attachment points to his sense of geo-cultural belonging to East Africa and the process of cultural hybridisation which he goes through. If, as Avtar Brah points out, the very notion of diaspora presupposes “a notion of a centre, a locus, a ‘home’ from where the dispersion occurs” (181), the centre in question for Nurdin is not India but rather Tanzania. In short, his identity is partially but irreversibly Africanised.

Such a difference in the sense of belonging, *No New Land* suggests, derives not only from personal and generational factors but also from historical influences. While India and Africa have a very long history of contacts, it was the carving up of the continent by the European powers in the late nineteenth century that triggered a far larger scale of Indian migration to East Africa. At the beginning of colonisation, both Germany and Britain failed to establish sufficient African workforce, and thus encouraged Asians to settle down and undertake commerce (Gregory 66). Haji Lalani’s move to Tanganyika takes place in this historical context (Vassanji, *No New Land* 12). While the increase of European settlers in the early decades of the twentieth century in British East Africa led to various discriminatory measures against the Asians (Gregory 67), they were at the same time treated better than indigenous Africans. As a result, they came to occupy a middle position between white European colonisers and the colonised people of black Africans (Brah 31). Partly because of this intermediary role, Asians maintained their cultural distinctiveness without much integration. Supporting colonialism at a subservient level, they gradually

strengthened their economic position in East Africa, so much so that Asians, together with Europeans, remained the major economic force till as late as the 1960s (Oonk 258). This symbiotic relationship with the British Empire, *No New Land* implies, led them to internalise imperial values. The Shamsis would speak “proudly of Churchill and Mountbatten, fondly of Victoria” and therefore find it difficult to accept the demise of the Empire (Vassanji, *No New Land* 22-23). Imperialism has a determining influence not only on the social and economic position of the Asian Africans but also their cultural mindset.<sup>3</sup> While their communal identity remains stable, their cultural affiliations become multiple.

If Haji Lalani’s generation is influenced by British imperialism, Nurdin’s is as much affected by the rise of African nationalism and the concomitant demise of the British Empire. Historically, some Asian Africans perceived African nationalism as undermining their relative colonial privileges (Simatei, “Diasporic Memories” 59), but Vassanji implies that others, especially the younger generation, reacted differently. In the novel, those whom the narrator calls “third- and fourth-generation Africans” “were taking readily to the new identity”; they endorse and to some extent even participate in the newly independent nation’s efforts to establish its cultural and economic autonomy (Vassanji, *No New Land* 24). Despite the ethnic and cultural differences, they feel that they are also part of the nation. African nationalism allows them to have a sense of belonging to Africa, and thereby relativises the centrality of the Shamsis’ communal values. Independence, the narrator comments, “did open up new vistas, intellectually” (24). As a result, their identity is further Africanised.

Nevertheless, precisely because some Asian Africans believe in the newly independent nation, a series of Africanisation policies swiftly adopted by the new government is alarming and alienating. “[T]he idyll of a new Africa” quickly becomes questionable for them (Vassanji, *No New Land* 24). Tanzanian government’s socialist policy to nationalise rental properties, most of which had been owned by the Asians, becomes “the final straw” for the Shamsis (25). This is because their decision to invest in their properties not only derives from their desire to build a monument to their economic achievement but also is the

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<sup>3</sup> Although *No New Land* does not make the following point clear, even Haji Lalani’s strong tie with the Shamsi community may be also influenced by history. According to Gregory, the communal orientation of the Asians became stronger after their migration to East Africa because the relative weakness of the colonial government at the early stage of colonisation forced them to deal with their affairs on their own (35).

“final act of faith” in the newly independent nation (25). Hence they perceive the government’s decision for nationalisation as “the Great Betrayal” (74). Although on a much smaller scale, Nurdin is also affected by the Africanisation scheme. His African friend and assistant Charles gets a promotion, while he finds himself “overlooked, neglected, as a matter of policy” (28). Out of bitter disappointment, Nurdin quits his job and starts to while away his time at a teashop where middle-aged men like him get together. Whereas Haji Lalani and other first-generation Asian migrants believe Tanzania to be a new land for their descendants due to their relatively privileged status in the colonial society and the concomitant stability of their communal identity, Nurdin’s generation, for the first time in the history of their migration, feel alienated and dislocated because of the turbulent after-effects of decolonisation. Importantly, their sense of alienation is a by-product of their partial identification with East Africa. Feeling marginalised and insecure, Dar es Salaam’s Asians emigrate to Canada.<sup>4</sup>

## II. Sense of Dislocation in Canada

Just as Haji Lalani on his arrival in East Africa could count on the community’s support, the Lalanis’ move to Canada is rendered less traumatic thanks to the Shamsis’ network. When their new life starts, they can at least count on some help from Zera’s sister and her husband, who had arrived earlier (Vassanji, *No New Land* 35). In fact, the information widely shared through the diasporic community’s tightly-knit network renders Toronto familiar even prior to their arrival. Rosecliffe Park’s apartment complex, in which the family soon finds their new home, had been symbolic of the dream of emigration among the Shamsis living elsewhere (2).

Such high expectations at first look confirmed by Canada’s affluence that dazzles the new arrivals; they suddenly find themselves surrounded by “luxuries by Dar standards,” which they had not even dreamt of owning (Vassanji, *No New Land* 59). Once the initial excitement dies down, however,

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<sup>4</sup> Nurdin’s sense of dejection and rootlessness further deepens when he realises that not only newly independent Tanzania but also the old imperial “motherland” rejects Asian Africans. On the way to Canada, the Lalanis plan to visit London, for which they feel affection because of their partial internalisation of imperial values. Nevertheless, they are not permitted to enter the country due to the British immigration officials’ racism-tinged suspicion that they would turn into illegal migrants and rob white British citizens of their jobs (Vassanji, *No New Land* 33).



harsher realities start to hit them. The romanticised residential buildings turn out to be poorly maintained and almost collapsing (2). The Lalanis, who used to hire an African servant in Dar es Salaam (88), suffer a significant drop in their living standard; they are not those diasporic migrants whose status in the new country is secured by economic strength and professional skills. In addition, cultural difference soon becomes a source of anxiety and frustration. The narrator explains how Nurdin feels when he and others are invited to a welcoming party for new immigrants: “This was not for him, an atmosphere that made him so conscious of himself, as if he was onstage and those people were the spectators” (52). The venue’s elegant ambience reminds him of his own difference and makes him feel out of place. Furthermore, at the party’s fashion show held to teach the new arrivals about clothing suitable for the new environment, some of them feel acutely embarrassed and even indignant to see women models showing off underwear (55). Relative openness to the issues of sexuality is seen as an attack upon their cultural norms.

If cultural difference is difficult to tackle, racism further undermines the immigrants’ self-esteem. Nurdin has difficulty in finding a suitable job, even though he had been a successful business agent in Tanzania. His applications are repeatedly turned down on the grounds that he does not have any working experience in Canada (Vassanji, *No New Land* 44). As Martin Genetsch rightly points out, this is an excuse that smacks of racial discrimination in that the new arrivals could be perpetually disqualified because of the impossibility of “obtain[ing] something that is the prerequisite of itself” (29). As a result, all Nurdin can find is various menial jobs. Ironically for the protagonist and other men like him, the women find employment more easily, as demand for jobs that are deemed suitable for women such as typists and babysitters is always high (Vassanji, *No New Land* 44). Although Nurdin is not a particularly patriarchal husband, the fact that his wife has become the main breadwinner while he is struggling to find an appropriate job wounds his male pride and deepens a sense of his own inadequacy (45). When he feels dejected and stays at home, all he can do is to hide “evidence of any degeneracy, giving the television time enough to cool” before other family members come back (66); he is deeply ashamed of himself. In addition, racism can more directly undermine the life of the Asian African migrants. Esmail, one of the Shamsi residents of Rosecliffe Park, is jeered at as “Paki” and is physically assaulted by three white Canadian youths (96). As their emigration was motivated by a desire to escape from racism in

post-colonial Tanzania, racism in Canada makes them wonder whether or not their very decision to move away from their African “home” was right (102). As Vera Alexander points out, Canada turns out to be “no new land” in that the Asian African immigrants find themselves as marginalised and discriminated against as in Tanzania (202).

The immigrants react to such an alien and even hostile environment by affirming their community’s unity, just as they did in East Africa. According to the narrator, “you realize that you’ve not yet left Dar far behind” (Vassanji, *No New Land* 60), as many neighbours in the apartment blocks where the Lalanis settle down are from Dar es Salaam. Nurdin can therefore console his disillusionment by having tea with other unemployed Shamsi men in the apartment’s lobby, just as he used to do at Dar es Salaam’s teashop (66). Living a life similar to the previous one in Tanzania, they try to create an ethnic and cultural cocoon (Steiner 465) and thereby soften the traumatic effects of dislocation. The more enterprising Shamsis soon start their own small-scale business within the apartment complex, and by doing so enhance their communal bond; one flat where tea and samosas are sold every weekend functions as a gathering place for the community, while another becomes a classroom for Quran (Vassanji 63-64). Even sharing news about Tanzania’s various problems helps them to consolidate the community’s tie, as it allows them collectively to confirm that their decision to migrate was right (187).

Nevertheless, such an effort to replicate Dar es Salaam’s Shamsi community in the new land proves to be impossible. Unlike the Shamsis of Haji Lalani’s generation who could believe in the stability of their communal and cultural identity in colonial East Africa partly due to their relatively strong economic power and social position, the changes that Nurdin and others go through in Canada are so drastic that they simply cannot be immune from them. The narrator comments:

Their Dar, however close they tried to make it to the original, was not quite the same. Rushing to mosque after work in your Chevy, through ice and slush, for a ceremony organized in a school gym . . . was not the same as strolling to your own domed, clock-towered mosque fresh after a bath. (Vassanji 171)

The very attempt to recreate the “original” community inevitably reveals the copy’s difference, because, as Dan Ojwang rightly points out, the immigrants’ conscious effort to conserve their culture is itself a symptom of their sense of displacement (84). Consequently, despite their efforts to retain their identity, they cannot but be aware that “the spirit,” “[t]hat intangible that lights up the atmosphere,” is missing (Vassanji, *No New Land* 171). It is in the hope of minimising such effects of dislocation that some community members, notably Nurdin’s wife Zera, ardently entreat Missionary, their spiritual leader who is still in Africa, to emigrate and re-strengthen their religious and communal identity.

While *No New Land* sympathetically portrays the Shamsis’ efforts to maintain their communal identity in order to cope with their sense of geo-cultural dislocation, Vassanji also highlights some negative consequences of such attempts and thereby considers their diasporic experience from another angle. For one thing, pressure to maintain respectability is undeniable. Despite his financial difficulties, Nurdin buys a car because he feels too ashamed to go by public transportation to the community’s mosque, “where your real worth is measured” by other members (Vassanji, *No New Land* 89). In order not to stand out as a loser, he is compelled to pretend that he has achieved a certain degree of economic success, but ironically, the very necessity for pretence reminds him of his difficulties and deepens his misery. The community’s pressure for conformity makes the life of Nurdin’s sister-in-law Roshan difficult as well. Although she suffers from her husband’s domestic violence, she dares not seek help from the police, partly because the community’s social norms discourage its members, particularly women, from revealing their personal problems to the public (137). The group’s demand to follow its own rules leaves her few options.

The community’s centripetal force also makes it difficult for their members to foster interactions with other ethnic groups. In fact, Rosecliffe Park is a microcosm of multicultural Canada where people of different ethnicities live side by side (Vassanji, *No New Land* 60). Nevertheless, the Shamsi community does not seem to have significant communication with other ethnic groups; it simply compartmentalises itself. In fact, it is so insular that it does not notice the coming of a big anti-racism rally until the last minute, even though the racist attack upon Esmail, one of its own members, is what triggers the protest. This rally is a significant watershed in that it for the first time creates cross-ethnic solidarity among Toronto citizens to protest against racism (107).

Nevertheless, the Shamsis remain somewhat aloof. The narrator speaks for them: “A Paki rally was not really their cup of tea — weren’t they from Africa? . . . None of them seemed to realize, or care, that Esmail belonged to them, their particular East African Asian Shamsi community” (109). Their strong communal tie, which partly derives from their East African experience, makes it difficult for them to forge a strategic alliance, even with those who share “Indian” ethnic backgrounds. Even in the new environment, their community still maintains its “predilection for isolationary existence” (Simatei, “Voyaging” 34) that had characterised it in East Africa, and once again runs the risk of failing to establish a strong cross-communal rapport. As the final section of this essay will also demonstrate from a different angle, Vassanji’s evaluation of the community’s role is deeply divided; while he sympathetically describes the Shamsis’ attempt to preserve their communal identity, he is equally critical of the community’s oppressive hold that could prevent them from building a fruitful interaction with other ethnic groups, whether in (post-)colonial Tanzania or multicultural Canada.

### **III. Transforming Cultural Identity**

Such a portrayal of the Shamsi community to some extent chimes with Vassanji’s view that “if you are from the outside, you’re always an outsider because part of you belongs there . . .” (“History” 50). As I have already mentioned, however, this does not mean that the immigrants’ identities remain intact. In fact, Vassanji explores another dimension of double diasporic experience by highlighting some characters’ attempts to transform themselves by taking advantage of the new opportunities offered by Canada and the extent to which such attempts are influenced by their earlier relationship with the Shamsi community in East Africa.

As Tina Steiner also observes, the character who is most eager to transform himself is Jamal the lawyer (471). Interestingly, his relationship with the Shamsi community had been already precarious even before its relocation to Canada. Jamal’s father, who is partly of Persian blood, is a maverick who believes in a new Africa and loudly argues for racial integration through intermarriage (Vassanji, *No New Land* 72). His suggestion undermines the very foundation of the community, in that cross-racial marriage would make its ethnic boundaries porous, if not completely wipe them out. For what the

community regards as his serious transgressions, he is severely ostracised and loses his job. When Jamal later becomes a successful lawyer despite his family's financial difficulties and starts to work for the newly independent government, he revenges himself by openly showing his contempt for the community. Even while he is forced to stay in Rosecliffe Park after fleeing from Tanzania due to a political intrigue, he does not hesitate to call his fellow community members "Pakis" (71). Burning with ambition for success, he consciously maintains a distance from them. He quickly marries an English woman and moves out of the apartment complex. Once he re-emerges as a lawyer with Canadian qualifications, he insists on a "proper" lawyer-client relationship (160) and thereby almost cuts off his tie with the community, although it is he who gets the charge against Nurdin dropped. At the end of the story, his career becomes so successful that he pursues his legal profession on a global scale. Partly because of his already tenuous relationship with the community, he eagerly embraces the new chances offered by Canada. For him, moving to Canada is not so much a dislocatory experience as a chance to step across the constricting communal boundaries and widen career possibilities.

Nanji, a former classmate of Jamal, is another character who has gone through considerable transformations that are triggered by his geo-cultural move. Whereas Jamal aggressively seeks his worldly success, Nanji is an introspective intellectual, who tends to feel despair because of his existential agony (Vassanji, *No New Land* 75). His pessimistic worldview seems to be deepened by his increasingly weakening tie with the Shamsi community. He had lost both of his parents in a car accident when he was small, and was raised by his grandmother, who also passed away while he was in the United States to study on a scholarship. Having lost important family members, his rapport with the Shamsi community has been unravelling by the time other members settle in Canada; he is "alone, adrift and floating" (99). Such a sense of uprootedness is intensified by his renunciation of religious faith.<sup>5</sup> Witnessing the passionate student movement during the Vietnam War in his university days, he learns the importance of independent thinking and becomes a non-believer. His boundary crossing is therefore as radical as Jamal's in that he has deliberately chosen to renounce the very cornerstone of the Shamsi community. His weakening sense

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<sup>5</sup> What Nanji goes through reflects Vassanji's own renouncing of his religion. He recalls how difficult it was for him to forsake his faith, which was inseparably tied up with a sense of communal belonging (Vassanji, "History" 50-51).

of belonging, however, does not lead to personal liberation; it only aggravates his existential anxiety. “[C]onstant search,” the narrator comments, “is what living had become for him” (100). His agonising sense of rootlessness is resolved only when he decides to marry Missionary’s daughter and thereby restores his psychological, if not religious, tie with the community to some extent.<sup>6</sup>

Unlike Jamal or Nanji, Nurdin does not have strong ambition or sharp intelligence that might help him to adapt himself to Canada through redefining his identity as Shamsi. As I have already discussed, he has difficulties in meeting the new challenges. His misery is further heightened by the open contempt that his daughter Fatima, who is young enough to acculturate herself to the new environment relatively easily, shows toward him as a symbol of the alleged backwardness of the Shamsi community, which she calls “this little Paki-shitty-stan of Don Mills” (Vassanji, *No New Land* 167). If, as Jonathan Rollins points out, Canada’s multiculturalism tends to generate intergenerational conflicts when the younger generation get more assimilated (143), Nurdin certainly suffers from such conflicts. Reminding him of his failure to cope with the new land, Fatima deepens his midlife crisis.

The awareness of his own inadequacy, however, does not prevent Nurdin from probing the possibilities that the new life in Canada offers, just as he had been to some extent open to cross-cultural interactions in Tanzania. His relative cross-cultural flexibility enables him to make friends with Romesh, another diasporic Indian from Guyana, and through his connections he finally secures a stable job. Influenced by Romesh, who has been thoroughly acclimatised to the Canadian way of life, Nurdin timidly starts to explore what has been religiously and culturally prohibited. He tries pork sausage, tastes beer, and even goes to a peep-show. He also comes across Sushila, an old acquaintance of Dar es Salaam days, and starts to cultivate a friendship which quickly becomes tinged with something deeper. His potentially romantic relationship with her, which allows him to dream of “his own freedom” (Vassanji, *No New*

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<sup>6</sup> Another character who experiences a dramatic transformation of cultural identity is Esmail. After being assaulted, he starts painting, although he does not seem to have any real talent. Probably seeking artistic inspiration, he eventually goes back to Dar es Salaam and never returns. At the end of the novel, he becomes such a commercially successful painter that he is to participate in an East African art exhibition held in New York. Given that he on the day of the assault was wearing a Kaunda suit, which Shamsi men had “bought in a frenzy of African patriotism in Dar but now wore proudly in Toronto to set themselves apart” (Vassanji, *No New Land* 95), and presently paints only “masks” (164), blatant racism in Canada seems to have made him return to his “African,” rather than Shamsi, roots.

*Land* 175), emerges partly because of his relative openness to cultural difference; Sushila is not a Shamsi but of Hindu low caste background and had been marginalised in Tanzania's Asian society. While being well aware that visiting such a woman alone in her house goes against the Shamsis' socio-cultural norms, Nurdin still enjoys her company. Such cross-communal openness on his part is in sharp contrast with the more orthodox Shamsis, such as his wife Zera. Despite the drastic changes of the environment, Zera's communal identity seems unfluctuating, mainly due to her devout religious belief. Compared with her unwavering commitment to her religion and the Shamsi community, Nurdin's life seems culturally and psychologically more unstable, but at the same time more open to the possibilities of cross-cultural interaction and transformation.

Significantly, however, Nurdin is incapable of perceiving his cross-cultural sensitivity as a possibility. His response to the new cultural environment is characterised by his "inarticulate bafflement" (Malak 280), an example of which can be seen in the following passage: "Something had changed, he did not know what, perhaps new ideas, like the question he was asking, not knowing why. Some inner reserve was creaking, shifting its weight" (Vassanji, *No New Land* 83). Here he is vaguely aware of his own cross-cultural transformations, but his inability to conceptualise them deepens his anxiety, as is suggested by the phrase "inner reserve was creaking." His nervousness derives from the fact that he without realising it judges himself in light of the traditional norms of the Shamsis, according to which changes unsanctioned by the community are nothing but aberrations. Despite his apparently weak tie with the community, he is on a deeper level very much conditioned by communal values. It is for this reason that even just to imagine breaking a taboo makes him feel irreparably guilty (129). When he actually breaches a cultural prohibition by trying pork sausage, he cannot but bitterly reproach himself: "Eat pig and become a beast. Slowly the bestial traits—cruelty and promiscuity, in one word, godlessness—overcame you. And you became, morally, like *them*. The Canadians" (127). Significantly, he perceives his new experience as the alarming first step toward losing his moral and cultural footing as Shamsi and becoming assimilated within Canada against his will. Consequently, he senses "the real rot" inside himself (128) and feels as if his dead father, who symbolises communal authority for him, were severely scolding him. An additional sense of guilt that his new "friendship" with Sushila brings makes

him even more nervous (173). If Nurdin is torn between communal values and the burgeoning dream of personal freedom (Vassanji, “Interview” 3), the fact that he himself is not able to comprehend the extent to which the former define him deepens his anxiety.

#### **IV. On the Ambivalent Ending**

The false accusation of sexual assault constitutes the nadir of Nurdin’s identity crisis. While Jamal the worldly-wise lawyer succeeds in persuading the white girl to drop the charge against him, Nurdin’s real saviour is Missionary who has just moved to Canada around the time of the incident. One day, he surprises Nurdin by mischievously putting on the red fez that Nurdin’s father used to wear, and thereby somehow manages to rid Nurdin of his inferiority complex. The narrator explains: “That instant the red fez was exorcized. In one stroke that photograph [of Nurdin’s father] on the wall had lost all potency, its once accusing eyes were now blank, its expression dumb. Suddenly they were here, in the modern world, laughing at the past” (Vassanji, *No New Land* 197). As I have already pointed out, Nurdin’s sense of failure in the new land had been deepened by imagining what his father might say had he been alive. As Alexander observes, the father was “a powerful super-ego” for Nurdin (224). Missionary’s “exorcisation” of the red fez symbolically robs the father of his authority, in relation to which his son regarded himself as a loser, and thereby frees him from a sense of his own inadequacy.

For this reason, Missionary’s prank enables Nurdin to envision his life in Canada more positively. The end of the novel sees the protagonist determined to keep his job. The narrator further explains the protagonist’s transformation:

It seemed to Nurdin that, with the dust settled, some kind of commitment had been wrought from him in the proceedings of the past few weeks. Missionary had exorcized the past, yet how firmly he had also entrenched it in their hearts. Before, the past tried to fix you from a distance, and you looked away; but Missionary had brought it across the chasm, vivid, devoid of mystery. Now it was all over you. And with this past before you, all around you, you take on the future more evenly matched. (Vassanji, *No New Land* 207)



In her careful reading of *No New Land*, Alexander calls this scene a “somewhat implausible ‘happy ending’” (203). While Alexander discusses the ambivalence of the ending scene in relation to the gap between Nurdin’s apparent happiness and the pessimism implied by the novel’s title, the ambivalence in question is also a result of the double-edged nature of Missionary’s intervention. It is certainly true that Missionary as a spiritual leader of the community heals its members’ feelings wounded in their struggles to settle down in the new environment and encourages them to envision a hopeful future (Birbalsingh 104).<sup>7</sup> He does this, it seems, by encouraging Nurdin and others to re-examine their past and accept it as part of their present. This involves a re-evaluation of their rapport with their own community, given that the past in question partly refers to their Shamsi roots. For this reason, Nurdin feels that “some kind of commitment,” namely a commitment to the community and its values, “had been wrought from him.” The affirmation of a sense of belonging to the Shamsi community and its traditions gives him a certain ethnic pride and thereby enables him to face the future better, just as the same pride made it easier for Haji Lalani and his generation to cope with the alien East African environment.

Nevertheless, there is something deeply tragic about Nurdin’s apparent contentment. The phrase “with this past before you, all around you” gives an impression as if he became immobilised by the weight of the Shamsi’s communal values that derive from their history. Implanting in Nurdin a sense of commitment to the community, Missionary does not allow him to explore the possibilities of personal liberation outside it. The very final paragraph of *No New Land* also highlights what he has lost in exchange for his stabilised sense of belonging. Referring to the aborted relationship with Sushila, the narrator concludes: “the freedom it would have led him to . . . now seemed remote and unreal, had receded into the distance . . .” (Vassanji, *No New Land* 208). Sushila, who had been marginalised in Dar es Salaam, is again silenced in the new land. In other words, the novel’s ending emphasises how the community’s unity is maintained by excluding those who are deemed as not belonging to it and by forcing one of its members to give up the many cross-communal possibilities

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<sup>7</sup> Missionary indirectly helps Nanji to overcome his identity crisis to some extent as well. Seeing Nanji’s relationship with his daughter developing, he consolidates it first by making them engaged, and in quick succession by setting up the date for their wedding in the name of the Shamsi tradition (Vassanji, *No New Land* 201). While Nanji remains wary of his influence, Missionary symbolically re-accepts him into the community by making him follow its customs.

that he has glimpsed through his struggles in the new environment. Despite Nurdin's seeming happiness, the novel thus implicitly raises important questions not only as to the extent to which Nurdin is conditioned by his Shamsi background, but also how the community's centripetal force, in its attempt to cope with diasporic dislocation, could stifle the possibilities of cross-cultural transformation.

In order to consider the nature of this equivocal ending in relation to Vassanji's abiding interest in the politics and poetics of diaspora, it might be helpful here to take a look at the ambivalence Vassanji himself seems to have felt about his role as a postcolonial writer at the early stage of his literary career. On the one hand, he clearly believed that a postcolonial writer should function as "a preserver of the collective tradition, a folk historian and myth maker" ("Postcolonial Writer" 63). Underlying this sense of mission was his awareness of an impending crisis, in that the way of life that his and other communities had experienced was rapidly dying out due to the drastic historical changes in the second half of the twentieth century. To record such a disappearing world, he asserts, is one purpose of postcolonial writing (66). Commitment to speak for the diasporic Asian African community is clearly discernible here.

Vassanji's involvement in the literary journal *The Toronto South Asian Review* reflects a similar concern. He established the journal in 1982, remained its editor for a long time, and thereby played a significant role in fostering a literary community of South Asian Canadians (Mukherjee 30). The journal's first editorial concisely defined its main purpose: "*The Toronto South Asian Review* seeks to make accessible to a wider audience literature that traces some part of its inheritance and meaning in the culture, traditions and history of the Indian subcontinent" ("Broadening Horizons" 1).<sup>8</sup> At the time that Canada's multicultural policies were gradually institutionalised (Kortenaar 557), Vassanji clearly felt an urgent need to establish and maintain a cultural space where Canadian writers of South Asian background could publish their works. For the purpose, the journal provisionally assumed a certain cultural commonality among South Asians (Mukherjee 31).

Nevertheless, Vassanji was also as keenly aware of the danger of basing the scope of the journal on an essentialised notion of South Asian cultural identity. The same editorial expresses the hope that the journal will "help to

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<sup>8</sup> This editorial is unsigned. Considering that all the later editorials of *The Toronto South Asian Review* bear the signature of Vassanji, however, it is possible that this first editorial was also written by him.

develop literary perspectives that are not confined by the horizons of a limited landscape—be it geographical or cultural” (“Broadening Horizons” 1). While arguing for a paradigm of South Asian writing, he equally emphasises the danger of setting up too rigid geo-cultural boundaries. This tension within Vassanji, together with the increasing acceptance of writers of various ethnic backgrounds by Canada’s mainstream culture, eventually led to the decision in 1993 to change the journal’s name from *The Toronto South Asian Review* to *The Toronto Review of Contemporary Writing Abroad*. Vassanji justified this name change on the grounds that “[r]ather than seek and try to conform to a single, pure identity,” it would be “more truthful to acknowledge the confusion . . . of identities . . .” (“Growing Out” 8). By removing the epithet “South Asian,” Vassanji not only widened the journal’s corpus but also implicitly drew attention to the process in which a “South Asian” identity is complicated, if not completely erased, by various strands of cross-cultural dynamics. By 1993, he is well aware of the importance of exploring the possibility that “the confusion” of identities opens up, rather than to speak for South Asians or Asian Africans.

*No New Land*, published two years before Vassanji changed the name of the journal, explores a similar issue, but from a different angle. While he sympathetically portrays how the twice-displaced Shamsi community seeks to maintain its unity in the new land, he also highlights the consequences of closing off the possibilities of cross-cultural transformation. Dan Ojwang perceptively observes that Vassanji’s fiction is characterised by the tension between the desire for cosmopolitanism and the reassurance offered by a sense of ethnic belonging (36). Viewed in this light, the significance of *No New Land* lies in its scrutiny of how diasporic double dislocation brings to light these opposing tendencies. Charting the mutation of cultural and communal identities, Vassanji highlights the significance of the painful yet necessary exploration of possibilities in cross-cultural transformation.

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