

TINA STEINER

The Pull between Old and New Communities in M.G. Vassanji's Novels of Migration *No New Land* (1991) and *Amriika* (1999)

No New Land and *Amriika* tell stories of journeys from Dar es Salaam in Tanzania to Canada and North America respectively. Both novels of migration explore the ambivalent processes of negotiating transcultural identity. This negotiation happens between the boundary markers of the security of the diaspora community (the original homeland community) on the one hand and integration and new affiliations to communities in the host countries on the other.¹ There is a textual change in relation to the above grid between the earlier novel, *No New Land*, which focuses more on the characters' privileging of their "Muslim East Africanness" within the secure but also, at times, restricting diaspora community and the later novel, *Amriika*, which explores possibilities of transcultural identities that are open to new affiliations with different communities in the host country.

Vassanji's migrant characters concerned are all Muslim East African Asians from Tanzania with historical roots in India and Pakistan. The novels illustrate that the geographical displacement becomes a challenge on intercultural frontiers of peoples and locales. Both Clifford and Gilroy see

1 I have used the term "new affiliations" rather than the more obvious one of "assimilation." The latter has often been used in quite aggressively intolerant immigration policies and suggests that the migrant, the Other, has to abandon his or her home culture to be absorbed by the host society. This understanding of assimilation as acculturation places the responsibility of cross-cultural understanding solely on the migrant rather than the whole social environment, which often acts in an "un-host-like fashion towards the new arrivals" (Brah 23-25).

these interstitial spaces of cross-cultural contact as "anxiety-inducing," resulting in the "recovering" and/or "making" of new identities in the face of a radically different environment in which migrants find themselves (Gilroy 107; Clifford 7). It is this new social space, the "contact zone" where "disparate cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other," that destabilises perceptions of culture, community and the self (Pratt 4). In reaction to this destabilisation diasporic identity is claimed and disclaimed constantly and notions of East Africanness/Canadianness or Americanness reconfigure the broader boundary markers mentioned above. To seek shelter in the diaspora community of migrants and thus to keep the connection to the past in East Africa alive exists alongside the breaking away from the past seeking new communities. The former reaction to the contact zone emphasises continuity and involves the "recovering" of identity which maintains clear boundaries between "us" (the East African Asian immigrants) and "them" (the Canadians/the Americans) favouring stasis and purity, whereas the latter reaction, more comfortable with the instability of movement, engages in the "making" of a new identity within the host culture.

Vassanji's texts distinguish between individual and communal identities, pointing to the complex relationship between personal biography and collective history of the East African Asian diaspora community. Personal identity is articulated within and against the collective experience of a group, but the minutiae of daily life of an individual does not simply mirror group experience. By the same token, collective identity cannot be reduced to the sum of individual experiences (Brah 124). In *No New Land*, the diaspora community builds up a complex microcosm of shops, eateries, mosques and clubs, asserting their "East Africanness" in face of the indifference of Canada's multiculturalism: "Why doesn't someone tell these Canadians we are not Pakis. Tell them we are East Africans" (Vassanji 103-04). The diaspora community also resists the strategic essentialism of the broader immigrant community: "A Paki rally was not really their cup of tea—weren't they from Africa? It seemed that they were being forced into an identity they didn't care for, by the media and public, and now by these Paki Asians who meant well but couldn't keep their distance" (Vassanji 109). The novel shows how the diaspora community has a strong influence on individual migrants, who, particularly just after their arrival in Canada, see their "main identity as community member" (Vassanji 2005). This identity is refracted and differentiated by other identities—of gender, linguistic abilities, class and generation. It is these social configurations that provide the lenses with which

to view negotiations of identity in the two texts. But before a close analysis of the two novels, one needs to look at the place of departure, which functions as a constituting and defining locale for the diasporic community.

The novels are set against the background of the double origin, Tanzania and India, which already suggests a history characterised by movement rather than stasis and Vassanji shows how the historical process of displacement opens up contact zones, where culture is performed in interstitial ways, supporting Clifford's observation that we cannot speak of "sociocultural wholes subsequently brought into relationship (with its overly linear trajectory)" but of approaches that explicitly articulate "local and global processes in relational, non-teleological ways" (Clifford 7). If one looks at the city and country of departure in the novels, Dar es Salaam in independent Tanzania, one can trace such a history of encounters, of relational entanglement.

The presence of Indians in East Africa is the result of the highly intricate colonial and mercantile history of the Indian Ocean world and can be briefly sketched by the following instances of crossing: indentured labour during the nineteenth century; early twentieth-century migration to Africa as the land of opportunity; the formation of colonial East Africa and the complex restructuring of colonial hierarchies after independence (Lewis 217; Brah 1). In the "colonial sandwich" Indians often worked closely with the colonial administration and essential services as well as in the trade sector. After independence from colonial rule these hierarchies were restructured by declaring non-African citizens as "inauthentic" and followed by material dispossession and coerced departures (Joseph 18). Ugandan Asians under Idi Amin suffered the most violent removal but the trauma of 'failed citizenship' affected Asians living in Tanzania and Kenya, directly resulting the migration of East African Asians to the West in the 70s (Joseph 2). Already in East Africa the Muslim Asians form a liminal community characterised by voluntary and involuntary transnational movement. Joseph describes this as a complex history of "transnational longing, simultaneously invoking lost homelands like Uganda, originary moorings like India [and] new countries of domicile" (Joseph 18).

In Vassanji's novels we find references to the resurgence of nationalism after independence and the global consequences of capitalism, which to different degrees influence the decision to leave Dar es Salaam for "another more desirable location" (De Mel 289). This is echoed in Vassanji's own

biography, which follows similar trajectories of international migration,² drawing attention to “roots” that are intricately linked to “routes.”³ In an interview, Vassanji explains that “although we were Africans, we were also Indians”; “I see myself as an Afro-Indian”; “I am not an immigrant who believes that you have to leave everything behind” (Kanaganayakam 20). In a lecture at the University of Cape Town, Vassanji responded to the question of identity as follows: “Identity does not equal A and then B and then C. It cannot be fixed. You can be many things at the same time” (2005).

The history of complex origins as reflected in Vassanji’s own life and in his comments above, as well as the migration stories he tells in the two novels that will be discussed, point to possible reasons for the move from East Africa to the West. In the novel *No New Land* (1991), for instance, one could argue that the newly independent state is a threat to the Asian population in Dar es Salaam, which fears that the coup in Zanzibar would repeat itself on the mainland:

As if confirming the worst fears, within a few weeks followed army mutinies in Kenya, Uganda, and Tanganyika, quelled, embarrassingly enough, with the help of British commandos. During the short-lived mutiny in Dar, looking out, frightened, through their windows, Asians witness their shops being looted. Weeks later, in Dar, rental properties, most of them Asian, were nationalized. The “Uganda exodus” showed a way out for Dar’s Asians. (Vassanji 23-25)

There is also the sense that this rush to Canada has economic causes. Canada becomes a site of desire and longing with its “dazzle and sparkle that’s seen as far as Asia and Africa in the bosoms of bourgeois homes where they dream of foreign good and emigration” (Vassanji 40). Technology and progress are the promises that Canada holds for the Asian population in Dar, who are assuaged by “insecurity,” “fear,” “competition” and “greed” (Vassanji 64). In

Amriika (1999) the economic and academic reasons for migration also go hand in hand with the possible threat to personal safety. Ramji, the protagonist, looks back at his 27 years in America and muses:

And so I followed the route of so many visitors to this country. I allowed convenience, the temptation of the good life, and the assurance of safety and freedom to detain me, even as I held on to the image of the errant patriot, needed, missed in his native land. And then my grandmother died, and home had never seemed so far away. (Vassanji 166)

What is interesting here are the complexities of constructing an identity that spans the geographical and mental divide between East Africa and America. Ramji’s need to “hold on to the image of the errant patriot,” as well as his enthusiastic embrace of many things American go hand in hand and the one allows for the other. Brah points out how in the diaspora space the different points of reference, in this case Americanness/East Africanness, mutually reconfigure and decentre received notions of identity (Brah 210). It is precisely this contrast between the diaspora community with its link to the East African past and the new communities in the host country, and all its porous possibilities between, that make Vassanji’s novels such complex examples of the formations of transnational identities. Both novels, *No New Land* and *Amriika* offer interesting insight into this distinction, emphasising that the diaspora space, by definition, is a site of ambivalence and conflicting trajectories of breaking out of community and at the same time reconstituting community in new surroundings. In *No New Land* the diaspora community in Toronto resembles very closely the neighbourhood community of Asians in Dar es Salaam and it is this continued proximity of former neighbours that explains the tenacity with which a communal identity is proclaimed. In *Amriika* the protagonist Ramji moves from this sense of neighbourhood community in Dar to a position where he sees himself as part of many other communities: the student community of the late sixties, the civil rights movement, anti-Vietnam groups, the community of a religious sect, and the radical Islamist group around the *Inqalab* magazine, from which he distances himself at the end of the novel.

In the novel *No New Land* (1991), Nurdin Lalani, a salesperson, and his wife Zera, with teenage children Hanif and Fatima, Asian immigrants from Dar es Salaam, have come to the Toronto suburb of Don Mills to find a new life, only to discover that the past and its values pursue them. Hence, it is not only the strangeness of the new place with which the various characters

2 Born in 1950 in Kenya of Indian descent, M.G. Vassanji was brought up in Dar es Salaam. When the United Republic of Tanzania came into being in 1964 questions of citizenship and passport were far from straightforward (Clifford). As a young man he left the University of Nairobi on a scholarship to study physics at M.I.T in Massachusetts, United States. He earned a Ph.D. in nuclear physics from the University of Pennsylvania. In 1978 he settled in Toronto, Canada where he still lives with his family.

3 The wordplay of “roots” and “routes” comes from Clifford’s book *Routes. Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Clifford 1997).

grapple, but the fact that "we are but creatures of our origins" as Nurdin points out (Vassanji 9). This conundrum of immigration is also suggested in Vassanji's title and epigraph, which quotes from "The City" by C.P. Cavafy as saying there is "no new land, my friend, no/ New sea; for the city will follow you, / In the same streets you'll wander endlessly..." (Vassanji). The text asserts again and again the continuity between past and present, between the left-behind locale and the new location, upheld by the diaspora community's aim to resist assimilation into mainstream Canada:

Of course, the Shamsis of Dar had recreated their community life in Toronto: the mosques, the neighbourhoods, the clubs, and the associations. They even had Girl Guides, with the same troop leaders as in Dar. But no Boy Scouts: some things were different. That was the whole crux of the matter now. *Their Dar, however close they tried to make it to the original, was not quite the same.* The sparkle was missing. (Vassanji 171, my emphasis)

This wish to recreate the "original" has to do with the fact that the new cultural codes seem impenetrable as well as overpowering, so rather than assimilating to Canadian ways of living that seem incomprehensible, the immigrant community keeps their home customs alive, it actively claims and recovers an East African identity which is set against the disabling label of "immigrants." The quote also suggests that the process of this recreation can be described as a translatory process. The word "translation" comes, etymologically, from the Latin *translatum*, "bearing across." This captures some important aspects of migration: having been borne across, the migrants attempt at bearing across their world as well. The Canadian Dar, a copy or translation of the real city, successfully recreates the social set-up, even though it "was not quite the same" as the narrator suggests here. Something gets lost in translation but the text also supports the notion that something is gained. Rushdie captures this ambiguity of translation from a writer's perspective in his introduction to *Imaginary Homelands*:

It may be that writers in my position, exiles or emigrants or expatriates, are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at a risk of being mutated into pillars of salt. But if we do look back, we must also do so in the knowledge—which gives rise to profound uncertainties—that our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, *create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind.* (Rushdie 10)

The narrator of Vassanji's novel dryly comments on the fictionality of the Canadian translation, but the immigrants who translate, look back with the urge to reclaim and find meaning in their communal identity. Thus translation—the carrying across—is influenced by nostalgia, which describes the way of looking at the original. The word *nostalgia* is important in this context. It comes from two Greek roots—*nostos* (home) and *algia* (longing); Boym speaks about two kinds of nostalgia:

The first one stresses *nostos*, emphasizing the return to that mythical place somewhere on the island of Utopia [...], where the "greater patria" has to be rebuilt. This nostalgia is reconstructive and collective. The second type puts the emphasis on *algia*, and does not pretend to rebuild the mythical place called home; it is "enamoured of distance." This nostalgia is ironic, fragmentary and singular. (Boym 1998, 241; Boym 2001, 49)

Boym's distinction of these two kinds of nostalgia is helpful to shed light on the ambivalent relationship of the two boundary markers of this chapter. The project to create a better Dar with the comforts of Canadian life is such a collective restorative nostalgia, which seeks to actualise that mythical place of home. It is therefore significant that the East African diaspora community lives closely together in two apartment blocks, which form an island, a safe haven from the alienation and flux represented by the Canadian surroundings. Thus the distinct "topography of No. 69 Rosecliffe Park Drive" functions as counterpoint to an unsettling present through its focus on the past (De Mel 174). Hence, this kind of nostalgia corresponds with the identity formation, which seeks continuity within the known community. The strategic invocation of East Africa, the focus on the *nostos*, supplies the diaspora community with an identity, holding anxiety at bay.

However, the Canadian surrounding influences the characters and unwillingly, unwittingly their lives change, sometimes coming closer to the fragmented vision of home of the second type of nostalgia that Boym describes as reflective. This reflective kind of nostalgia is concerned with the "irrevocability of the past and human finitude, it suggests new flexibility, not the reestablishment of stasis" (2001, 49). The recognition of change, sometimes resulting in disconnection from the diaspora community, depends on the social positioning of the characters.

Beginning with gender, one has to note that Vassanji's novel mainly uses older female characters to maintain the connection to the past and to keep the diaspora community intact. The text's representation of three women, Roshan,

Zera and Sushila in relation to the diaspora community and the past in East Africa is particularly interesting. Nurdin's sister in law, Roshan, who arrived in Canada before them with her husband Abdul, eagerly embraces Canada's materialism, expressed by her mantra "this is Canada" (Vassanji 35). Her hopes for a better life are encapsulated by these often-repeated words but the text shows the limitations of such a naïve expectation. Roshan's suffering under the violent attacks of her husband does not get resolved, because in times of crisis she (and the other women) sticks to codes of behaviour carried across from East Africa. In Roshan's case of abuse, Nurdin exhorts her to "call the police [...]. This is Canada" but the women decide to keep quiet "hush-hush, don't wash your dirty linen in public" (Vassanji 137). This recurs repeatedly in the text, where individuals want to embrace the new possibilities that Canada offers, but somehow they cannot escape the fold of the diasporic community. It is also interesting to note that the role of the community is not just one of protection but in this case condones suffering for the sake of cultural tradition. The text positions the female characters as the repository of tradition but also shows how this can operate against their interests. In her discussion of African male writers' construction of women in their texts, Stratton points out that the women characters are often identified "with the heritage of African values" (Stratton 46). Similarly, Mama asserts that women are seen as "the bearers and upholders of traditions and customs, as reservoirs of culture" (Mama 54). Most of Vassanji's women characters fall into this disabling trope.

Zera, Nurdin's wife, is another female character who "did not like change" and who works tirelessly to get Missionary, their religious and social leader back home, to emigrate as well (Vassanji 6). She becomes an active agent in the narrative closure of the novel with this insistence on the past, as Missionary's arrival produces two important results: Nurdin stays with his family, resisting the temptation of an extra-marital affair and Nanji gets married to Missionary's daughter Khati. The novel thus foregrounds the point that the connection to the past is a solution to the turmoils of migrancy, however, in the case of Roshan's abuse the past is seen as a trap, preventing a change of her situation. De Mel remarks that the narrative resolution of Nurdin's commitment to the diaspora community depends on "a particular stasis" and "fetishizing the past" and thus elides the attempts by characters to break away and challenge certain aspects of this communal identity (De Mel 175).

Sushila, a cobbler's daughter from Dar, widowed, living on her own above Kensington market challenges these traditional gender roles and the forceful role of the diaspora community. Sushila is represented as a character with determination who clearly breaks with tradition and class by refusing to go back and help her family after her husband's death and by studying for a high school diploma in middle age, because she had been denied this opportunity as a child (Vassanji 157). She also challenges Nurdin, because she is single and self-sufficient and talks more freely. When she proposes they spend an afternoon together Nurdin realises the possible freedom this offer presents:

What to do? Let his life slip by, this golden opportunity escape—for what? He was a mere servant, slaving away for his children, whose lives now all lay before them, full of possibilities—did they need him any more? And Zera was wedded to God, it seemed. *Sushila promised release. But wasn't it this freedom that was so attractive, that made possible a new world—his own freedom?* (Vassanji 175, my emphasis)

Sushila is thus the only older woman in the novel who looks forward to a new reality, without the nostalgic backward glances so characteristic of the other women. But, in the narrative resolution her free voice is silenced and excluded. As the temptress she has no place in the diaspora community and the last the reader reads of her is her standing at the window of her flat looking out, silent and rejected. The narrator aptly draws the attention of the reader to Nurdin's rejection of her in his acceptance of the past, again foregrounding that the possibilities of his individual identity—this tentative freedom—are subordinate to the collective identity:

It seemed to Nurdin that, with the dust settled, some kind of commitment had been wrought from him in the proceedings of the past weeks. Missionary had exorcised the past, yet how firmly he had *also entrenched it in their hearts*. That afternoon of opportunity, the tryst he had almost agreed to—and the freedom it would have led him to—now seemed remote and unreal, had receded into the distance, into another and unknowable world. (Vassanji 207-08)

Missionary, the community leader from Dar, who agrees to emigrate to Canada as well entrenches the past in their hearts and Nurdin's personal experiences that distance him from the diaspora community are erased—become an unknowable world.

Like gender, class, material success and employment influence the negotiations of diaspora identity. The text initially positions the diaspora community as a social safety net, where the more successful members carry those who have less. This spirit of sharing breaks down more and more in the novel under the strain of combative capitalism and its assimilatory pressures, resulting in an awareness of class differences. Modest material expectations, a residue of Dar standards, are censored: “‘Wah,’ said Nurdin, lounging on the sofa. ‘This is enough for me. This is all I ask for.’ ‘Wait,’ said his sister-in-law, ‘you’ll want more. And you’ll get it. This is Canada’” (Vassanji 36-37). Soon enough, the expectations of others start to come down on Nurdin:

And mosque, how could you go by bus to mosque: where all comparisons begin and end, where your real worth is measured. When did you arrive? You tell them. What work do you do? And you’re crushed, what to tell them. All the while newcomers, younger people find jobs, success stories proliferate, bus and subway drivers in uniforms—men you thought no better than you—haughtily stare you down, prouder than doctors and accountants with cute kids and expensive wives. (Vassanji 89)

The community that could offer support and nurturing turns out to be more interested in success stories, even if they come at the expense of a sense of belonging. In his article on exile, Said discusses this phenomenon, where individual success overrides the well being of the community: “Exile is a jealous state. What you achieve is precisely what you have no wish to share” (Said 141). Nurdin’s fruitless search for a job reminds the reader of the constant attrition of unemployment, which is exacerbated by the lack of support from the diaspora community: “Dejection and defeat written all over his face, he looked like a shrunken version of himself, red eyed, weary, his clothes crumpled, the day’s growth of beard bristly on his face” (Vassanji 7). “A shrunken version” is a bad translation. The confidence and simplicity of selling shoes in East Africa is not carried across to Canada. Nurdin’s search for a job also takes a toll on his body, thus the hostility of the host country is inscribed in his body, in the lines of his face: “He felt tired these days, old. His hair had greyed and thinned, there were lines on his face, and his skin somehow looked more opaque in the mirror” (Vassanji 85). In her study of unemployment among British South Asian immigrants, Brah points to the manifestations of acute financial problems, like “boredom, depression, anxiety and anger” (Brah 55). The young people do not seem to understand the

difficulties of their elders and Nurdin has to face his children’s unsympathetic questions about his inability to find a job:

Gone were the days of fullness of heart, the sense of wholeness at having children. Time was when it was children that brought a man rushing home. *But this country had taken his children away*, and he felt distanced, rejected by them. (Vassanji 166, my emphasis)

The self-fashioned future is mainly about material success, particularly important to the young and Fatima unequivocally tells everyone who asks her that she wants to “become rich.” To many of the girls and boys of Sixty-nine and Sixty-seven and the other high-rise apartment buildings in this part of Don Mills, this is what growing up meant—“making it” (Vassanji 4-5). Materialism becomes the substitute for a close knit community where people can rely on each other’s help and Nurdin realises that Fatima would “rise to where they had neither the courage nor the ability to reach” (Vassanji 167).

To build up a business, or to own a house would have taken the work of generations in Dar, is now a matter of a few years. Thus the location fosters high expectations that weigh on the immigrants; hence Nurdin speaks about the “reckoning with a future” that he has to create for his children. It is therefore not surprising that the main problem of this future in the diaspora is an exacerbated generation conflict that splits the community.

Like class, generation is a social category, which refracts and partially determines the negotiations of diasporic identities for the characters of the novel. Whereas the older generation suffers, the children thrive in their new environment: “It is part of recent folklore at Sixty-Nine that in Canada even the children of pygmies grow up to be six-footers. And good-looking too. As if to bear this out, Fatima towered over her parents, and in the elevator only one man was as tall as she” (Vassanji 4). Physically as well as socially, the younger East African Asians are more at home in Canada and Nanji, a young linguistics lecturer at the University of Toronto, expresses the dilemma of the younger people who are inevitably becoming westernised “which is what we’ve opted for by coming here” (Vassanji 77). The painful rift within the community exists particularly between generations: the young who can translate themselves easily into the new context look down on the perceived clumsiness, and the ill-fitting, ill-at-ease otherness of their elders:

There must be something in the Canadian air that changes us, the old people say. The old people who are shunted between sons and daughters and old

people's homes—who would have thought that possible only a few years ago. It is all in the air: the divorces, crimes you could never have imagined before, children despising their parents. (Vassanji 136, my emphasis)

The disbelief and puzzlement of the older people at behaviour that would not have been possible in Dar also shows how the environment changes the community and even though the nostalgic longing to create a second Dar is upheld by the older generation, the children lack such nostalgia—they are impatient to translate themselves into Canadians, foregrounding and proclaiming this identity over others. Assimilation becomes more inevitable, the longer the migrants stay. But the children are the reason for emigrating in the first place, for whose sake the parents leave their home and community. Still in Dar, Nurdin muses about the power of English and how students that had gone to England for a while and then came back a class apart: “Ten years hence would your children forgive you when they saw their friends return as wealthy tourists waving dollars and speaking snappy English?” (Vassanji 26).

Language and the ability to speak without an accent is another determining factor of the kind of affiliations open to the characters. The connection between the mastery of English and wealth is explored constantly and the rift between those with strong accents and the children who speak perfect Canadian English yet again emphasises this: “One envies these children, these darlings of their mothers, objects of immigrant sacrifice and labour, who speak better-sounding if not better English.” (Vassanji 64)

Zera and Nurdin's daughter Fatima is particularly disdainful of their past and tries very hard to emulate everything Canadian: ‘Fatima, who went to school and spoke English with an accent neither of her parents could even move their mouths to imitate, now had a mind of her own (Vassanji 67). It is also her, who insists that they go and watch fireworks by the lake—a Canadian activity:

act like Canadians, for chrissakes! All this playing cards and chatting and discussing silly topics while glugging tea by the gallon and eating samosas—is not Canadian. Not realizing that most Canadians she knew and met were like her, with parents not too different from hers. (Vassanji 129)

Fatima's rejection of her parent's rootedness in their own culture has to do with the pressure of assimilation, the attempt not to stand out as being different from other Canadians. The naïve wish to fit in is undercut by the text's episodes of encountered racism by the host country, foregrounding

racial identity over and above other identities. This Othering that the immigrants experience negates their efforts of being recognised as fellow citizens. It is interesting to note how transcultural identity is claimed and disclaimed constantly. Wanting to be recognised as fellow Canadians goes hand in hand with the assertion “tell them we are East Africans” (Vassanji 104). The diaspora space is thus one that is characterised by negotiations of movement. To create a home from home means the interrelation of East Africanness with Canadianness and this is an ongoing process, constantly in flux. When discussing the regret of having left Dar, the characters have to confront their reality in Canada:

That intangible that lights up the atmosphere—the spirit, perhaps—was missing, as everyone, even Roshan This-is-Canada acknowledged. All this said was that they, themselves, waiting for their master, Missionary, to come and reinforce their faiths, were also not quite the same. (Vassanji 171)

The character who best shows this complex precariousness of shifting identities and a willingness to change is the lawyer, Jamal, who came to Canada empty-handed but has now got his own law firm. His success is only possible through the curtailing of ties with the immigrant community. He becomes “their former friend, they had to remind themselves, now that he'd moved up in the world” (Vassanji 9). Very aware of the instability of his status, he actively widens this gap: “There was a proper distance between a lawyer and a client. Professional conduct demanded it. He maintained this distance by putting between himself and them a secretary, a saucy ‘Canadian,’ who recognized no relationship bar that of lawyer and client” (Vassanji 160). In his personal life, he creates this distance by marrying a Canadian woman:

The residents of Sixty-nine—those who had been invited—had never forgiven Jamal his wedding reception, where they had been thrown together with people they could not relate to, all the accommodation—including the speech and jokes—being made for those others (the “Canadians”) and not for them. It made them feel inferior. (Vassanji 159)

Nanji who is always very perceptive, knows that Jamal's acculturation is a risky task and he muses: “If there is anyone worth watching, any life worth following, it's surely his. Even in his conformity, his *assumed respectability*, he is taking a risk, walking a dangerous path” (Vassanji 162, my emphasis). Assumed respectability is the key here to understanding how the text positions

Jamal as a mimic. He is assuming, putting on an identity for the sake of conformity and he does it well. There is the costume: expensive suits, setting: plush home and intimidating law firm, prop: Mercedes, wife: Nancy, who can be called Nasim. The risk that he runs is rejection by the community he has chosen. The efforts he pours into this new affiliation, this cutting ties with the past, might not be enough, for as the title of the novel intimates, there is "no new land" and "in the same streets you'll wander endlessly" (Vassanji). Moreover, the text also suggests that the characters might always be subjected to hostility and racism of the host society.

Unlike Jamal, Nurdin does not seek to substitute the past with new ways after his decision to not get involved with Sushila, but rather wants to look squarely at the past from a new position. Thus even though Nurdin re-establishes his link to the diaspora community, he acknowledges that he has changed in Canada. With the help of missionary, he is able to exorcise the fear of his father: "in one stroke that photograph had lost all potency, its accusing eyes were now blank, its expression dumb. *Suddenly they were here, in the modern world, laughing at the past*" (Vassanji 197, my emphasis). It is his own community who helps him to greater psychological freedom, but there is also the sense that it could have only happened in Canada, "the modern world." Canadian "air," this agent of change, thus helps Nurdin in his journey to a small measure of personal freedom along with the acknowledgement of a past, devoid of mystery:

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 207)

Nurdin, as well as the other migrants, is negotiating his own positions vis-à-vis this strange new country which affords these strangers many possibilities as well as restrictions in the creation of a transnational identity. This happens between the two poles of either proclaiming an East African diaspora identity, full of nostalgic longing for the left-behind place and foregrounding the needs of the diaspora community or/and of engaging with the making of a new identity, stressing movement rather than stasis, seeking new affiliations with other real or "imagined communities" (Brah 93). In *No New Land* the migrants on the whole tend to orient themselves towards what is familiar, but Vassanji shows how it is impossible to resist change completely. In his later novel,

Amriika, he focuses more on this change, often resulting in reflective nostalgia, where the position of detachment is desirable rather than lamentable.

In *Amriika* (1999) Vassanji imagines a protagonist who distances himself from the East African diaspora community in the States to engage with real or "imagined communities"—Brah uses this term to explain political affiliation which does not necessarily result in a face-to-face meeting of members of such communities. This is unlike the close-knit diaspora community where everybody knows about everybody else's problems and concerns. Rather than emphasising the continuity of a past in Africa and a present in the West, this novel traces the rupture and disconnection caused by transnational movement for an individual. Like *No New Land*, *Amriika* is a story that begins with the departure from home but, as the difference in the titles hints at, is more concerned with the destination than the location of departure.

The title of the novel, *Amriika*, is the way Ramji's grandmother pronounces "America." By changing the name, she creates a set of associations for her nephew that will always be a combination of the memory of her and her spirituality and of invoking the image of a mythical place of fulfilment, a destination that holds exciting new possibilities:

Our ancestors were Hindus who were converted to a sect of Islam. In Grandma's words, the sun would arise that day from the west. How far was this west? My people sought it first in Africa, an ocean away, where they settled [...]. But in time this west moved further, and became—America; or, as Grandma said it: Amriika. (Vassanji 3)

The religious imagery created here of the "sun rising from the west" brings together the notion of paradise as well as apocalyptic changes due to the complete shift of the natural order inherent in the movement of the sun. This, I think, captures precisely the view of migration that this novel seeks to establish. Whereas in *No New Land* the main metaphor of migration is "the trap" and thus the characters stick to their own community in order not to fail, Vassanji clearly uses the metaphor of space, the universe, to point out the terrifying aspects of migration and at the same time the exhilarating potentialities of the discovery of a completely unknown world. On his first night in America Ramji feels like the lunar astronauts and muses about his return to Dar/earth:

When would *he* return? Someday. Meanwhile here he was, plucked out from his old life and suspended ... in this silence, in this darkness, in this alien air [...]. Perhaps he was dreaming ... or had died and, now a disembodied spirit, was looking down on himself. (Vassanji 13)

The use of language here is an interesting balance of threat and possible discovery. Despite the violence of the culture shock that suggests to Ramji that he had died and that his identity is "suspended," the comparison to the landing on the moon suggests new possibilities; he is entering a "new life":

Sirens hooting in the night, so demonically urgent, so persistent, sending chills up his spine where he lay wide-eyed in his bed, grappling with *a world that had just cracked open*. (Vassanji 7)

Apart from his friend Sona, he is on his own within a campus community of American and international students caught up in the Vietnam crisis in the late 60s. Interestingly, in comparison with the immigrants in *No New Land*, the foreign students are invested with relative status and thus do not experience the direct hostility that the immigrants to Canada experience, who are immediately inserted in a racialised insider/outsider discourse. This has to do with the fact that foreign students are expected to go "home" once their studies are completed and thus pose no threat to the host country but also comes back to Vassanji's opinion that the forming of a new identity is easier for young people as we have seen in the discussion of *No New Land*. There is also an obvious class difference between the foreign student and the unemployed immigrants. Ramji, starting an undergraduate degree, without Nurdin's burden to having to provide, focuses on the possibilities his new abode has to offer. His curiosity about America was already sparked at home in East Africa, firstly through his grandmother's prophetic pronouncements and through the visible effects of globalisation in Dar.

American culture and politics are part of everyday life in Dar es Salaam and this effect of globalisation already causes acculturation at home. Ramji follows the news on radio: the landing on the moon, Elvis, foodparcels to Berlin, the Cuba crisis and the Kennedys. However, all the news are questioned, albeit naively, by local opinions: "The fundis—tailors—outside Grandma's house were all of the opinion that the Americans had the world fooled: 'Éti, how can anyone go to the moon'" (Vassanji 9). This kind of discussion of American culture in the home environment does not prepare

Ramji for the culture shock that awaits him on arrival but it makes him aware of other ways to look at the world.

Initially, at the Morrisises, his American host family for the summer vacation, it is TV, in front of which he spends most of his time, which becomes the main source of information. Comparing notes with his friend Sona he writes:

They have shown me all those things you mention, and more—I have seen the gadgets and the gizmos (how I love that word!). And I am *immersed* in television. Gomer Pyle has me in stitches, and I *love* Lucy and Dick Van Dyke, and Jeannie and McHale—and I could sing you the Gilligan theme song ... and much more. I know about baseball now, but this is not the football season, you should know that! But no hippies here. (Vassanji 24)

Taking in enthusiastically as much of the new world as he possibly can while with the Morrisises, Ramji, now getting ready for university realises that he "had crossed a threshold" and that he was ready to "start his new life" (Vassanji 26). Within a month after arrival he feels much more comfortable and settled in the new environment of mainstream America. The university campus proves to be another, quite different challenge, as Ramji is confronted by "gurus, pirs, psychologists, zealots of every stripe" who are all trying to get disciples (Vassanji 29). Coming from a community in Dar where the communal identity is more important than the individual experiences within it, Ramji is insecure as to how to affiliate himself:

It was a marketplace of ideas they were in, a veritable souk, this city of colleges, Cambridge, Mass., founded by another persecuted people three hundred years before. It was a home for heresies, where the intellect found a place to be and become, find its rhythm from a multitude of beats, sample from dozens of tastes. Flyers everywhere—on public walls, on lampposts, on notice boards, or handed out enthusiastically in the corridors, on sidewalks, at building entrances—shrieked out their messages like hawkers peddling their wares. (Vassanji 29)

Ramji is overwhelmed and challenged to find a space for himself in this cacophony of voices and opinions. The quote above also points out the positive effect of University as a place where the intellect could "be and become." He cannot settle comfortably into focusing on his studies, because his roommate Shawn Hennessy, who works in the anti-Vietnam-war movement, engages him in lively discussions. In his bewilderment, he finds

solace in the Friday mosque ritual over which Sona presides and which is a continuation of "home":

So every Friday in a dense, carpeted area of the library he produced from his royal blue airline bag a white sheet, a bottle of holy water, a port glass, a small bowl, incense sticks, and matches, and conjured up a mosque for his congregation. (Vassanji 28)

Home, particularly his grandmother, seem so far removed, despite the ritual and Ramji is afraid of the changes effected by his new environment. After a lecture, he sees himself in a "more accurate, and scary" light: that to his grandmother at home, "who could have no idea as to what exactly was happening to him" he must be just an image, a memory. (Vassanji 39)

Ramji turns to politics: "there is a different way to view the world from the one [he was] used to" (Vassanji 66). This is a crucial point in his immersion in a different culture; suddenly there is much more possible choice and alternative ways of looking at the world and himself. Ramji discovers this fairly quickly and feels liberated by it. Looking back at this time, the older Ramji muses:

Whenever—and it has been often—I think of my first years here, in this land, it seems I had walked through a portal—a passageway—to emerge into a state of enchantment. There was no walking back of course, no undoing of that spell. There was now a certain looseness of step, an exhilaration, a sense of freedom. I had an awareness of a larger universe than the one I had known and of all manner of possibilities, of choice in one's beliefs and actions. I wouldn't say there was any less anxiety in this freeing myself of the faith and moral order of my ancestors, of the sense of guilt and sin which keeps one bound to their universe. There was terrible fear—of hell and damnation—awesome anxiety and loneliness, which only appear diminished now from this distance of years and seen through the intervening medium of nonbelief. (Vassanji 162)

The use of the two voices of narration, Ramji's young and naïve self and his older, more experienced self serves two purposes: it allows a longer time frame, thus detailing changes that have developed over decades and it allows two generations in one person. Vassanji thus reconciles the generation conflict of the earlier novel *No New Land*, Ramji is full of Fatima's impatience to integrate, but he is also aware that this youthful acceptance of everything new comes at a cost of feeling disconnected.

Estrangement as a way of crossing borders, of entering new territory, places Ramji's experiences firmly into Boym's second type of nostalgia referred to earlier as emphasising "algia"; it is "enamoured of distance, not the referent itself. Its nostos could exist in the plural as geographical, political, and aesthetic homes" (Boyim 241). It is not only the distance to Dar es Salaam, but Ramji develops a position in which everything—politics and faith—has to withstand the test of looking at it from a distance. When he joins a cult, after having abandoned the Friday mosque, it is this distance that preserves a degree of detachment and his eventual rejection of that particular religious community.

In his essay on exile, Said points out that the experience of displacement fosters an attitude of detachment: "in a secular and contingent world, homes are always provisional. Borders and barriers, which enclose us within the safety of familiar territory, can also become prisons" (Said 147). Vassanji emphasises that new ways of seeing and thinking are among the most positive gains of migration. If one compares Ramji's personal growth with Nurdin's, it becomes clear that the latter chooses "familiar territory" which ultimately also imprisons him within the constraints of diaspora community. There is a sense of authorial melancholy about Nurdin's turning away from some of the opportunities that Canada presents and the authorial weight seems to lie with Ramji's position of engagement with the host country.

Ramji's friend, Sona, however, reacts differently to the distance to home. He is completely immersed in his studies of the historical origins of the Shamsi branch of Islam that most Dar Asians belong to, and cannot quite follow Ramji's contemporary politics. Confronting Sona's lack of commitment to the political issues of the day, Ramji compares him to a tribe of shopkeepers "ducking issues while going on with their trade" and causing "trouble in East Africa" with that attitude of evasion (Vassanji 84). Sona retorts: "Look you're proselytizing! You've picked up the Christian ethic, you want to change the world—you've become an American!" (Vassanji 84). What is most interesting in this exchange is the fact that Ramji admits that he has changed: "There was no going back to one's previous state of being. *The more one stayed here the more altered one became*" (Vassanji 87, my emphasis).

Two decades later, Ramji thinks of Sona's scholarly work in quite a different way: "And yet all the while Sona had been as political as anybody could be" (Vassanji 205). What the text makes clear is that Sona's studies are not just a simple continuation of life in Dar but in their own way demonstrate a detachment from ideas of religious purity. Sona's cause is the preservation

of the history and beliefs of the Shamsi people and their syncretistic belief system, combining Islam and Hinduism. This has come under threat by “Arabism and Islamic imperialism” and the text is very critical of exclusive communities (Vassanji 205). Sona’s commitment to the history of this small community has not waned since their student days and he appeals to Ramji’s sense of identity:

Look. We are a community, with a history, language, identity. Would you that it all evaporate into nothingness? Surely not into nothingness, but into something else perhaps. But Ramji didn’t quibble. He felt curiously unmoved by Sona’s plea for communal integrity. (Vassanji 141)

Vassanji invents the Shamsis and their syncretic beliefs in order to show in sharp relief the intermingling of cultures that questions any simple constructions of origin and that excludes any attempt at cultural or religious purism. This partly explains Ramji’s lack of patriotic identification. For, what Ramji comes to treasure most, above any claim for identification with a community, is the sense of freedom and of personal choice which he did not have as a young student, when both he and Sona believed that they would go back to Tanzania:

The odd thing was that part of one’s new consciousness was to become more devoted to the country one came from, and to appreciate more its problems. There was no doubt in their minds that they would return as soon as possible to their young nation and participate in its development. (Vassanji 88)

As I pointed out earlier, this underlying assumption of return, in order to participate in nation building, is fostered by the host’s expectation of the temporary nature of the foreign student. At home, in Dar es Salaam, it is Ramji’s grandmother who reminds him of his obligation to come back and help her and possibly also the wider community:

Back home—how haunting is that term *home*—back home times were hard. Now that I had a place of my own, I thought of inviting my grandmother to come and visit. Instead she asked me to come back, and get married. (Vassanji 165)

This causes “annual guilt-ridden resolutions to go back to Africa, to do my bit for nation-building” but Ramji never returns (Vassanji 164). Interestingly, he

marries a woman from the East African diaspora community in the States but quite tellingly this relationship ends in divorce, distancing Ramji further from a sense of communal identity.

Ramji identifies strongly with the political climate of the sixties in America and therefore he participates in a big anti-war rally in Washington DC. Looking at all the young American protesters around him, Ramji is acutely aware that his identity as an activist is far removed from his “former self” and Vassanji again uses metaphors of outer space to illustrate this:

I am a guy, a simpleton, from the town of Dar es Salaam in the African country of Tanzania, belonging to a small Indian community called the Shamsis. Its so far away this city by the blue-green Indian Ocean, it could be in another galaxy; it could belong to another life, a past incarnation. . . . (Vassanji 108-09)

Being touched by the “magical sixties” with its “mark of righteousness and of belonging on the right side always” is something that permanently impresses on Ramji the wish to be engaged in politics and this is the main cause of his accepting Darcy’s invitation to work for the *Inqalab* magazine. The aim of this Islamic magazine is to “make inroads into mainstream culture” and to “subvert the homogenizing melting-pot” (Vassanji 276). This quote indicates that the host culture is clearly seen as pressurising immigrants to assimilate, thus becoming this homogenising force. In order to resist this force, Ramji is told by the editors that the journal is “polemical” and it is this zealous polemicism, with its particular brand of fundamentalism that makes Ramji eventually uncomfortable working with them. Critical detachment and the freedom of choice have become Ramji’s main credo acquired in America and any easy discussion of terrorism leaves him disconcerted (Vassanji 295). This gain of living in the contact zone is tested by an ironic turn in his private life: He falls in love with Rumina, the daughter of Sheikh Abdala, who forced young East African Asian women into marrying Africans for the sake of assimilating the Asian population after independence. When Ramji discovers this, he is so shocked that he breaks up the relationship but regrets this immediately. Rumina, a *persona non grata* in the eyes of the Asian diaspora community, challenges the truthfulness of Ramji’s assertion that he has broken ties with his community. Ramji rises to the challenge and while working at *Inqalab* they get back together. The possibility of their relationship shows how their new location has changed them and how little hold the past values have over them—they have become different people:

"Twenty-five years ago," he said, "I thought I had got it out of me, the sea.... Reminds me of home, a bit, but home's on the other side of the ocean, straight ahead of us." "Only it's not home any longer." "And we're not who we were." (Vassanji 282)

This statement encapsulates the main themes of creating a new identity in the contact zone, which Vassanji investigates in this novel. The first theme is the acknowledgement that the origin matters. There will always be that memory of the city by the sea in East Africa and the historical consequences of this origin that makes the negotiation between Americanness/EastAfricanness an ongoing process, even after thirty years. Another theme is the fact that "home" has shifted, that is "it's not home any longer." Rumina is the one to face that fact more squarely, for Ramji still fools himself about his possible return. And most importantly, Vassanji attests to the fact that they have created for themselves a home in this foreign country and as a consequence have changed.

It is clear that both novels engage with the complex multiplicities of constructions of transnational migrant identities. But whereas the characters in *No New Land* seem to maintain a restorative nostalgic position towards Dar es Salaam and thus proclaim their East African identity against forces of contamination and movement, the main protagonists of *Amriika* have a reflective nostalgic relationship towards Dar and the East African diaspora community. They cherish the distance and detachment gained through migration and the possibilities of new affiliations to other communities within the host country. In a conversation in Cape Town, Vassanji stressed that the character Ramji is based on his own experience of leaving East Africa in order to study abroad: "there is the feeling of guilt but the crossing of boundaries has to happen" (Vassanji 2005).

University of Stellenbosch, South Africa

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