



ICHSECMICE -2025 11-12th October 2025

Sardar Patel Institute of Higher Education, Kurukshetra

Migration in M. G. Vassanji's *The Book of Secrets*

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Abstract

Migration is one of the central historical and psychological conditions represented in M. G. Vassanji's *The Book of Secrets* (1994). Set primarily against the colonial and postcolonial history of East Africa, the novel traces the experiences of the Shamsi community, Vassanji's fictional representation of an East African South Asian Muslim community, whose history is shaped by movement, settlement, displacement and re-migration. Migration in the novel is not presented merely as geographical movement from India to Africa; rather, it becomes a complex process involving cultural negotiation, memory, racial identity, colonial power and the search for belonging. Through characters such as Nurmohamed Pipa, Mariamu, Ali and Pius Fernandes, Vassanji demonstrates how individuals and communities become suspended between different geographical and cultural worlds. The novel further reveals the contradictory position of South Asians in colonial East Africa: they are themselves migrants and outsiders, yet some participate in the racial and economic structures established by colonialism. The subsequent emergence of African nationalism and independence destabilizes their privileged colonial position and produces another phase of migration. Thus, *The Book of Secrets* presents migration as an ongoing condition rather than a single historical event. The novel ultimately questions the idea of a fixed homeland and suggests that diasporic identity is produced through multiple histories, memories and cultural encounters.

Keywords: Migration, Diaspora, Identity, Displacement, Memory, Colonialism, Hybridity.

Introduction

M. G. Vassanji occupies an important position in postcolonial and diasporic literature because his fiction repeatedly examines the historical experiences of South Asian communities in East Africa and their subsequent movements to other parts of the world. *The Book of Secrets*, first published in 1994, is particularly significant because it reconstructs several decades of East African history through the intersecting narratives of colonial officials, African inhabitants and the Shamsi community. Vassanji's treatment of migration moves beyond the conventional representation of the migrant as an individual who simply leaves one country and settles in another. Instead, migration becomes a continuing condition of uncertainty, negotiation and cultural transformation.

The historical background of the novel is essential to understanding its treatment of migration. South Asians had migrated to East Africa over generations for commercial, labour and other economic purposes. Vassanji fictionalizes this history through the Shamsis, whose community maintains strong cultural connections with an imagined India while becoming increasingly embedded in African social and geographical space. As Peter Simatei observes in his study of Vassanji, the arrival of Asians in East Africa, their attempts to maintain community identity, their encounter with their new environment and their later dispersal constitute an important historical drama in Vassanji's fiction.

In *The Book of Secrets*, therefore, migration operates at several interconnected levels. At the first level is physical migration: the movement of South Asians from the Indian subcontinent to East Africa. At the second level is social and cultural migration, whereby migrants negotiate between inherited traditions and the realities of their African environment. At the third level is historical displacement, caused by colonialism, war, nationalism and political transformation. Finally, there is psychological migration, in which characters experience a continuing uncertainty concerning where they belong.

International Advance Journal of Engineering, Science and Management (IAJESM)

Multidisciplinary, Multilingual, Indexed, Double-Blind, Open Access, Peer-Reviewed, Refereed-

International Journal, Impact factor (SJIF) = 8.152



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One of the most important aspects of Vassanji's representation is that the Shamsis cannot be understood simply as foreigners in Africa. Their identities develop through prolonged residence and cultural interaction. At the same time, their relationship with Africa remains complicated by colonial racial structures. Simatei argues that Vassanji's fiction exposes the instability of Asian identity in East Africa and the contradictions produced by the community's attempt to maintain cultural boundaries while living within an African environment.

The novel's concern with migration is closely connected with the concept of diaspora. Stuart Hall's influential formulation of cultural identity emphasizes that diasporic identities are not fixed essences but are continuously produced through history, difference and transformation. This theoretical perspective is particularly appropriate for Vassanji because the Shamsi identity changes through contact with African, European and Indian cultures. David W. F. Mount, in his study of *The Book of Secrets*, similarly argues that the novel presents the Shamsi community as a multigenerational diaspora whose identity is transformed through contact with different cultures.

The character of Nurmohamed Pipa illustrates the migrant's search for stability and belonging. His life is situated within a community that has moved geographically but attempts to preserve cultural continuity. The Shamsi community establishes institutions, religious practices, commercial networks and social structures that reproduce aspects of its remembered homeland. Yet the novel gradually reveals that the reproduction of the homeland in another geographical location can never be complete. The new environment changes the migrant just as the migrant changes the new environment.

The figure of Pius Fernandes provides another important perspective on migration and memory. His investigation of Alfred Corbin's diary creates a narrative encounter between colonial history and the histories of those who experienced colonialism from different positions. The diary itself becomes a symbol of the colonial attempt to record, classify and possess another society. By recovering and interpreting the diary, Fernandes reconstructs fragments of a past that has been obscured by official historical narratives.

Consequently, migration in the novel is inseparable from memory. The migrant carries the past into the present, but memory is selective and constantly reconstructed. Vassanji's narrative structure reinforces this idea by moving between different periods and perspectives. The past is not presented as a stable historical reality; it is recovered through documents, memories, stories and interpretations. Peter Simatei emphasizes this relationship between memory, history and Vassanji's representation of the Asian presence in East Africa.

The novel also demonstrates that migration can be produced by political change. With the decline of British colonial rule and the emergence of African nationalism, the position of the Asian community changes dramatically. The colonial system had placed Asians within a racial hierarchy that differentiated Europeans, Asians and Africans. Independence challenges this arrangement and creates anxiety among sections of the Asian community. Migration consequently becomes a response to the collapse of the colonial world in which some migrants had established economic and social security.

This historical transition reveals an important paradox. The South Asians are themselves migrants and therefore experience exclusion and displacement, but some of them have also benefited from the colonial economic system and participated in racial distinctions between communities. Vassanji does not simplify this contradiction. Instead, he presents migration within a complicated structure of colonial power, privilege and marginalization. Simatei notes that the changing political situation and African independence contribute to the Asian dilemma and subsequent dispersal represented in Vassanji's fiction.



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The novel therefore challenges the simplistic opposition between home and away. India represents an ancestral and cultural homeland, but East Africa becomes the geographical location of generations of lived experience. When political circumstances force individuals to consider leaving East Africa, the meaning of home becomes uncertain. Migration creates a condition in which the migrant may possess several cultural affiliations without being completely accepted by any single national identity.

This problem is captured particularly effectively in the novel's treatment of the question of whether to remain or leave after the decline of empire. The migrant is confronted with choices concerning return, naturalization or further movement. Such uncertainty demonstrates that migration is not necessarily resolved by reaching another geographical destination. The psychological question, where is home? continues even after physical movement has ended.

Thus, Vassanji's *The Book of Secrets* can be read as a significant migrant narrative of colonial and postcolonial East Africa. It records the movement of South Asians across geographical boundaries while simultaneously examining the movement of identities across cultural and historical boundaries. Migration produces both loss and possibility: it creates displacement, but it also generates new forms of cultural identity. The Shamsi community is consequently neither wholly Indian nor simply African; its identity is constructed through a history of movement, settlement, interaction and dispersal.

Conclusion

Migration in M. G. Vassanji's *The Book of Secrets* is a complex historical, cultural and psychological phenomenon. The novel demonstrates that migration cannot be reduced to the physical movement of people from India to East Africa. It involves the transformation of identity, the preservation and reconstruction of memory, the negotiation of cultural difference and the continuing search for belonging. The Shamsi community represents a diasporic population whose identity is shaped simultaneously by Indian ancestry, African experience and colonial history.

Vassanji also complicates the migrant narrative by showing the relationship between migration and colonial power. The South Asian community experiences displacement but is also implicated in the colonial racial and economic order. With independence, the disappearance of the colonial framework produces another historical displacement and stimulates further migration. The novel consequently presents the migrant as a subject caught between several historical locations.

Ultimately, *The Book of Secrets* suggests that the migrant's home cannot always be located on a map. Home becomes a combination of memory, culture, relationships and historical experience. The novel's diasporic characters inhabit what can be understood as an intermediate cultural space, continually negotiating between origins and destinations. Migration therefore becomes not merely a movement from one place to another but an enduring condition of identity. Through its treatment of displacement, memory and cultural hybridity, Vassanji's novel makes a significant contribution to the study of South Asian diasporic literature and postcolonial representations of East Africa.

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