



## Psychoanalysis of Migration in M. G. Vassanji's *Amriika*

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### Abstract

M. G. Vassanji's *Amriika* (1999) presents migration not merely as geographical movement but as a profound psychological experience involving displacement, alienation, memory, desire, identity conflict and the unconscious search for belonging. The novel follows Ramji, a Tanzanian Asian immigrant from Dar es Salaam who travels to the United States, where his expectations of America encounter the complex realities of immigrant life. From a psychoanalytic perspective, Ramji's migration can be understood as a disruption of an established psychic identity. His movement from East Africa to America produces a continuous tension between the remembered homeland and the unfamiliar host society. Feelings of nostalgia, loneliness, cultural estrangement and uncertainty reveal the psychological consequences of migration. Freud's concepts of the unconscious, repression, displacement and the return of the repressed provide a useful framework for examining Ramji's psychological condition, while Homi K. Bhabha's concepts of hybridity and the Third Space help explain his unstable cultural identity. The novel demonstrates that migration produces an internal journey parallel to physical movement: the migrant must negotiate memories of the past, desires for the future and anxieties generated by the present. *Amriika* therefore portrays migration as a psycho-cultural process in which the migrant continually reconstructs the meaning of self, home and belonging.

**Keywords:** Psychoanalysis, Migration, Unconscious, Repression, Alienation, Diaspora, Identity, Hybridity, Memory.

### Introduction

M. G. Vassanji is an important diasporic writer whose fiction explores the historical and psychological experiences of South Asians who migrated from the Indian subcontinent to East Africa and subsequently moved to Europe and North America. *Amriika*, published in 1999, is particularly significant because it shifts the geographical focus from East Africa to the United States and examines the psychological consequences of another stage of migration. The protagonist, Ramji, is a member of the Tanzanian Shamsi Muslim community who leaves Dar es Salaam and travels to America for educational and professional opportunities. His journey, however, gradually becomes an experience of psychological displacement. The America he encounters differs significantly from the America he imagines, and this gap between expectation and reality becomes central to his migrant consciousness.

Migration in *Amriika* can therefore be examined through psychoanalysis because the novel repeatedly represents the migrant mind as divided between contradictory desires. Ramji desires the opportunities associated with America, yet he remains emotionally attached to East Africa. He wants integration into the new society while simultaneously attempting to preserve aspects of his cultural identity. Tina Steiner observes that *Amriika* explores the ambivalent processes of negotiating transcultural identity, particularly the tension between the security of the original diasporic community and the possibility of forming new affiliations within the host society. From a Freudian perspective, migration may be understood as an experience that disturbs the psychic equilibrium of the individual. Freud's theory of the unconscious suggests that human behaviour is influenced by desires, memories and conflicts that are not always consciously recognized. In the migrant experience, memories of the homeland can become psychologically significant precisely because the migrant is separated from the physical environment in which those memories were formed. The past may therefore return through nostalgia, dreams, emotional attachment and repeated comparison between the old and new worlds.



Ramji's consciousness in *Amriika* reflects this conflict. America initially appears as a space of possibility and modernity, but the migrant's encounter with American society gradually produces feelings of cultural estrangement. The psychological movement from expectation to disillusionment is central to the novel. A recent study by Sukhadeve and Palwekar identifies *Amriika* as an important representation of displacement, migration, longing and exile and argues that Vassanji repeatedly explores the psychological effects of migration, including alienation and the unconscious search for identity.

The title *Amriika* itself can be interpreted psychologically and culturally. The altered pronunciation distinguishes the migrant's America from the imagined America of dominant Western culture. The word becomes a linguistic marker of distance between the immigrant and the host society. Chandra Arup Das and Smriti Singh interpret this linguistic difference in relation to the migrant's liminal position and argue that Vassanji's characters remain suspended between their inherited identities and their new American environment.

This condition can also be understood through Homi K. Bhabha's concept of **hybridity** and the **Third Space**. The migrant does not simply abandon the old identity and acquire a new one. Instead, a new and unstable identity develops between cultures. Ramji occupies such an interstitial psychological space. He is neither completely detached from his East African past nor completely assimilated into American society. His identity becomes a process rather than a fixed category.

The psychoanalytic concept of **repression** is particularly useful in understanding this process. A migrant may suppress painful memories in order to adapt to a new environment, but suppressed experiences may return through nostalgia, anxiety or emotional instability. In *Amriika*, Ramji's relationship with his past remains psychologically powerful even when he attempts to construct a new life. His movement to America therefore does not eliminate his previous identity; rather, the past continues to influence his perception of the present.

Another important psychoanalytic concept is **displacement**. Freud uses displacement to describe the transfer of emotional energy from one object or idea to another. In the context of migration, the term can also illuminate how emotional attachments to a lost homeland may be redirected toward people, places or relationships in the host society. Ramji's changing relationships reveal his attempt to recreate emotional security in an environment where the cultural structures of his earlier life are absent. His personal relationships consequently become connected with the larger psychological problem of belonging.

Ramji's experience also illustrates the phenomenon of **double consciousness**. He evaluates America simultaneously from within and outside its cultural framework. He observes American society as an immigrant while carrying memories and values derived from East Africa. This produces a divided perspective: America is both a place of opportunity and a place of alienation. The migrant therefore experiences the host society through comparison with the remembered homeland.

The novel's psychological dimension becomes particularly significant when Ramji encounters cultural and political tensions in America. His experience demonstrates that migration is not an uncomplicated journey toward freedom. The migrant may discover racial prejudice, ideological conflict and cultural misunderstanding in the host country. A recent critical study of *Amriika* similarly emphasizes the novel's treatment of the existential, political, cultural, moral and religious difficulties encountered by immigrants in the United States.

The psychological journey ultimately involves a search for a stable sense of self. Ramji's problem is not simply, where do I live? but who am I after migration? His East African identity has already been shaped by Indian ancestry and African experience. Migration to America adds another layer to this identity. The result is a complex diasporic consciousness in which multiple cultural affiliations coexist.



Thus, *Amriika* presents migration as both **external movement and internal transformation**. The physical journey from Dar es Salaam to America is accompanied by a psychological journey from certainty toward ambiguity and from inherited identity toward self-questioning. The migrant's mind becomes a space in which memories of the past and demands of the present continuously interact.

### Conclusion

A psychoanalytic reading of M. G. Vassanji's *Amriika* demonstrates that migration profoundly affects the psychological structure of the migrant. Ramji's movement from East Africa to America produces not only geographical displacement but also emotional conflict, cultural alienation, nostalgia and an ongoing search for identity. His experience illustrates Freud's insight that unresolved desires and memories continue to influence consciousness, while Bhabha's theory of hybridity explains the emergence of an identity located between cultures. The novel ultimately challenges the assumption that migration ends when the migrant reaches the destination country. Physical settlement does not necessarily produce psychological belonging. Instead, the migrant continues to negotiate between memory and present experience, homeland and hostland, cultural inheritance and adaptation. Ramji's psychological condition is therefore fundamentally liminal.

*Amriika* is consequently significant for the study of migrant literature because it transforms migration from a geographical event into a **psychological and psycho-cultural process**. Vassanji shows that the migrant carries the homeland internally, and that memories, desires and cultural affiliations continue to shape the individual's consciousness long after physical departure. The novel's central insight is that migration changes not only where a person lives but also how that person understands the self, the past and the meaning of home.

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