



A SAVIOUR OF CUSTOMS AND CULTURAL IDENTITIES?! DEPICTIONS ON NURDIN LALANI IN VASSANJI'S *NO NEW LAND*

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ABSTRACT :

Language and literature are embedded upon the cultural hierarchies in the society. The variation in both shows the differences in the societal background of the people. The people tend to maintain a level of standard in the society. The people develop strata of respect and recognition despite the toils of the past. The ancestral past had sufferings and ailments, which paved a path to the raise in unique literatures and in the development of various coping patterns. People responded both physically and mentally to the changes in the society, channelling the agony into protest. These protests are the ignition to a set of literatures that fuelled up the people to attain freedom and also to a literary quench. This protest prolonged even after the freedom by the societal challenges of preserving the heritage of the self among the cultures. The researcher has chosen the novel *No New Land* by M.G. Vassanji depicting the inner protests of identity for the study. It talks about an immigrant, Nurdin's, family and its struggles in a new land, with hopes of overcoming the challenges in the society. This paper puts light upon the factors of the society where economics, politics, culture and the people intersect and the characters cope up along the historical prejudices. Culture cannot be studied as a whole entity; it shapes itself with the ailments and the developments of the factors surrounding it.

Keywords: Culture, Heritage, Immigrant, Indigenous, Politics.

Introduction

Literature is a customary belief of the people that it is the reflection of the lives and livelihood of the ancestors. This reflection reciprocates itself on the people of the century and the future as well. Literature cannot be defined in a singular tone but can be multiplied to the will of the readers of the era. The flexible nature of coping up to the latter centuries make it even more interesting for the authors and the readers. The world becomes interconnected and the scholars are grappling with implications of globalization. They also explore the ways in which race, gender, culture, ethnicity and sexuality shape the production and reception of the world. Cultures are constantly interacting and exchanging ideas, through which literature is produced and interpreted around the world. The constant shift in the culture and the migration of people gives an amalgamation of cultures where each and every one has to struggle for the recognition of identity. Though the generations adapt themselves to the immigrated land, the struggle for the identity prolongs throughout the ages.

The novel *No New Land* by M.G. Vassanji focuses on an Asian immigrant Lalani family who moved from Tanzania, East Africa to Toronto, Canada. The family has come in search of a better life and soon finds out the impossibility of escaping the old values of their world. Nurdin was falsely accused of sexually assaulting a young woman, this devastated him. He struggled to clear his name and was made to deal with his own identity in this world. After several setbacks in life, Nurdin realised that it is possible to preserve one's cultural heritage and adapt to a culture of the new country. His realisation of the acceptance of being an open-minded person and to connect with the people of other cultures as well made him attain inner peace in the society.

Nurdin was raised to be an obedient middle child, by Haji Lalani, who always respects authority. Nurdin finds himself in a society which is very different than his own. The people around him belonged to different cultures, and his own cultural values are not shared by everyone. He struggles to find a job for his education and experience and feels alienated from the community, which he thinks as being materialistic and shallow. Nurdin's accustomed traditional way of life as a scholar and a respected teacher finds alienation in the new society. The customs of the other people makes him feel lost in the new land for which he joins a Muslim community and teach Urdu classes. He also joins in a political campaign fighting for the rights of the immigrants to be felt at home. This paper will assess the instances in the novel and claims whether it is fruitful to Nurdin.

Statement of the Problem

The statement of the problem of the study is that the immigrant communities face the challenge of balancing cultural conservation and assimilation into new societies. In addition to that intergenerational relationships with immigrant communities are sieved by varied levels of cultural adherence and adaptation. The above will be analysed with a qualitative study on Nurdin Lalani in M. G. Vassanji's *No New Land*.

Literature Review

The researcher had made a thorough study on the other characters and the interpretations on it. However, with the light of the arguments posed by the researcher, a little research has analysed how the characters of the novel embody the complexities while encountering the intergenerational conflicts and societal pressures they encounter. The personal growth of the impoverished character, Nurdin, was analysed as an aspect of cultural negotiation despite the struggles yet the overlooked ideas of the intersectional tension and the complexities of the structural barriers of the society were not given a comprehensive analysis.

Ethnic Affiliation

The Scholars Mr. Hussein Ali Abbas of Universiti Putra Malaysia and others in their articles titled "The Different Types of Ethnic Affiliation in M. G. Vassanji's *No New Land*" debated on the 'Ethnic Affiliation' in M. G. Vassanji's *No New Land*. The research has focused on the different types of affiliation i.e., residential affiliation, religious affiliation and social affiliation and these aspects have broadly focused on the connections between the characters and its coping mechanism in an alienated country.

Racial Discrimination

The Scholar Mr. Vasant Naik of Department of English, Karnataka University in his work "Racial Discrimination in M. G. Vassanji's Novel *No New Land*" has discussed the aspect of racial discrimination through the lens of diasporic literature. The research has focused mainly on the racial discrimination in M. G. Vassanji's *No New Land*.

Challenges to Masculinity

The Scholar Mr. Edwin Asa Adejei of University of Ghana in his article "Men in the Land of Promise: Immigration and Challenges to Masculinity in M.G. Vassanji's *No New Land*" has discussed the portrayal of masculinity in M. G. Vassanji's *No New Land*. The research has focused on the challenges faced by the men in an immigrant country and the concerns of socialization.

Transformation of Identities

The Scholar Shizen Ozama an associate professor of Tamkang University, Taiwan in the article titled "With This Past Before You, All Around You: On the Transformation of Identities in M. G. Vassanji's *No New Land*" has debated on the transformation of identities of the characters in M. G. Vassanji's *No New Land*. The research examines the limitations of cross-cultural dynamics, the oscillation of the cultural position and the belief in the possibilities of cross-cultural transformations of the characters in M. G. Vassanji's *No New Land*.

Quest for Identity

The Scholar Arup Chandra Das a research scholar at IIT Pune in his article "Identity in a 'liminal' Space in M. G. Vassanji's *No New Land*" has discussed the characters' search for identity and the sense of nostalgia due to the migration. The research has discussed the quest for identity in a liminal space through a diasporic perspective.

The review of literature showcases the multifaceted ideas in M. G. Vassanji's *No New Land*. With reference to the above researches and identifying the research gaps the study aims to provide a nuanced understanding on "A Saviour of Customs and Cultural Identities!? Depictions on Nurdin Lalani in Vassanji's *No New Land*", thereby contributing a unique research idea for literary conversations.

Research Queries

The researcher tries to elaborate and add insights to the study with the following research queries.

1. How does Nurdin Lalani's character reflect the psychological and cultural struggles of assimilation in immigrant communities in *No New Land*?
2. How does Nurdin Lalani's evolving identity highlight the tension between cultural heritage and modern societal norms in *No New Land*?
3. To what extent does Nurdin Lalani's experience of marginalization critique class inequalities in *No New Land*?

Objectives of the Study

The major objective of the study is to highlight the challenges faced by Nurdin Lalani and his resistance in maintaining the immigrant cultural identities. Secondly, this study seeks to analyze Nurdin Lalani's role as a cultural saviour and the inference for understanding his actions in attaining a

firm approach in balancing the known devil and the unknown angel. Finally, the researcher portrays Nurdin as a saviour to the impoverished immigrant culture.

Methodology of the Study

The researcher has applied the standard principles of research methodology as explained in MLA handbook 9th edition are adapted in this research article. In addition to that critical approaches such as sociological approach, psychological approach, and the aspects of Intersectionality were applied. The researcher has made a qualitative research study on analysing M. G. Vassanji's *No New Land*.

Discussion

Cultural hierarchy is a system of social ranking within a particular culture. It is based on the factors such as education, occupation, family background. It is considered to be a way of maintaining the social order and stability in the society and it is also considered as a way of ensuring that the people are treated fairly. For Nurdin, cultural hierarchy is a prominent part of his life. He is raised to respect the superiority and be respectable. Despite the challenges he faced in Toronto, Nurdin is determined to preserve his cultural heritage. The first gen immigrants always had a constant fear of coping up to the environment and the latter adapts them self to the surroundings. Likewise, Nurdin's father Haji Lalani had a rough start in his business in Congo, after a while his shop became famous in the locale. But, due to the increase of shops around the locality his business does not bloom as earlier. He was also spiritual and involved in spiritual discussions during his free time. On the advice of his superiors in the mosque, he got married and got three sons and four daughters. Haji is righteous and known for his sternness. He would never hesitate to send a rude boy away in cuffs or to scold a girl who lacked her modesty even by looking at other men.

... Narandas had two daughters and a younger son. With the second daughter, Nurdin and Shamshu played. The older daughter was tall and dusky, with a prominent jewelled nose-stud ... She did not talk to Akber, of course, because Akber was an adult. He was sixteen. ... He was in love with her and pretty certain his affection was returned ... Then Akber wrote a note – beginning with a ghazal and ending with “Will you marry me?” He sent it with a servant with specific instructions as to whom it should be handed. The servant headed straight for the opposite flat, without a moment's thought, and the first person he saw there was Narandas's wife. “What do you want?” she asked. He handed her the note. The note ended up on Haji Lalani's lap.

The Germans, in their time, had a standard punishment for offences, called simply “Twenty-five,” for the number of strokes of a whip. ... Haji Lalani took the German option and beat his son senseless using a schoolmaster's cane. ...

Narandas moved away with his family. Akber was married off to a local girl, and a year later moved to Tabora, inland. ... (Vassanji 17, 18)

The righteous way of living was taught to the Lalani's in the hardest way possible at the earliest. It is a proof that Lalani was a honest and religious person. These harsh treatments made Nurdin Lalani to remain a man with morals. Nurdin was a mediocre; he is average in height and always took part in the mischievous activities but was conscious not to get involved too much. His impression among the family is too subtle that he is considered as a good-for-nothing person and one who spills tea when carrying it.

The people of the country struggled a lot just to earn a place in the society. People from all over the world immigrated to Canada even from the rich countries like America. The root cause of this event is the law passes by General Idi Amin that Asians should be sent off from Africa to their respective countries or to the fugitive camps. This caused a lot of people to migrate and find settlements in other countries which lends hand i.e., Canada. After settling down, the people had to suffer a lot to earn a place in the society and to get recognised as a person with customs. The people of same sect unite and oppress or ill-treat the people of other sects. In order to get into better strata, people had to toil for generations and earn a piece of recognition. Nurdin is one among the people who suffers to find a place in the society. Though the journey was tough for Nurdin, he had learnt the fact that one has to accept the stratum in order to be at recognised strata.

There were those whose final act of faith in the new country was to put the savings of two generations of toil to develop a mud and limestone dwelling into a two storey brick building. These buildings lined Dar's main streets, each a monument to a family's enterprise, proudly bearing the family name or else that of a favourite child. When they were taken, that was the final straw. (Vassanji 25)

After the Uganda Exodus by General Idi Amin, people migrated to Canada and set their lives amongst the people of various cultures. In the earlier part of the settlement people had to suffer in finding jobs, permanent shelter, and to mingle along with the people from other regions of the world. After settling down in the country, it made impacts in all their lives. Haji Lalani was one to take too much of it to himself and it was obvious that the new lifestyle does not suit him, which took his life away. The society does not include only the people; it includes politics, economical state of the people and the business domains. In this novel the author has mentioned all these issues scattering the ideologies throughout the novel. Haji was one to indulge in all these domains.

We 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 behind and are not easily shaken off. An account of Nurdin Lalani's predicaments must therefore go back in time and begin at a different place. (Vassanji 9)

The allegation on Nurdin shook down his family and it made them realise the situation that their efforts to mingle with the rest will never bear fruit. The change of geography affected their family in every aspect possible and they took a while to get back on their feet. This tormenting shook down their will to live in the mixed culture. The insinuating thoughts that Nurdin attacks a girl, made him reminiscence the way of life he led during his adolescence. The narrator describes Nurdin as a boy who would never dare to do such behaviour. He quotes “... Nurdin. Cowered before his father's wrath, afraid to dare, aware beforehand of the repercussions that would follow” (Vassanji 17)

Conclusion

Assimilation into a new culture often leads to psychological and identity struggles for immigrants, particularly the ones with dislocation and societal marginalization. The research queries give varied insights on Nurdin's conservation of cultural struggles and assimilation of the immigrant communities and its repercussions. The researcher respond to the first research query is that every immigrant face a set back at the start and eventually it eases itself away from the difficulties; however Nurdin had intersectional aspect of attack on the race, culture and religion. Nurdin at the start was never ready for the big change but he evolved and assimilated his immigrant identity by joining a community which accepts him and engulfs him with its attributes. The second query focuses on the relationship between him and his kids along the other younger generation in the country. The modern societal norms normalise the consumption of foods that are against Nurdin's religious norms but in order to feel included he tried to eat pork. This is one of the instances that created a tension between his cultural heritage and modern societal norms. ". . . And you became, morally, like *them*. The Canadians" (Vassanji 127). The immigration to London, the cancellation of Lalani's arrival in it and the detour to Canada where they felt welcome, gave them a sense of belongingness. This made them a state of mind where the family was ready to an extent where every cultural norm they have been following can be neglected and including themselves in the cross cultural activities. The Lalani's despite their roots attempts to assimilate the values of other culture; however they came crawling back to the root.

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