

Depiction of Liminal Spaces in M. G. Vassanji's *The Book of Secrets*

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INTRODUCTION

The Book of Secrets, a novel by M. G. Vassanji, depicts the gradual transformation of the African colony of Tanganyika into an independent nation Tanzania. As seen from the history of the world, the twentieth century marks the demise of the British Empire that had once claimed that the sun never sets on it. Though the handing over of power by the colonizers is formally complete, the same cannot be said about the process of decolonization. Though the Empire has gone as a necessity of the changed circumstances, the empirical world-view, with its modes of representation and perceptions appears to be deeply rooted in the hearts of the colonized people.

The diary of Alfred Corbin, a civil servant in the British colony of East Africa, serves as the basis for the novel's overall plot which is mostly replete with the colonizer's justification. Corbin refers to his arrival in Africa as a benevolent gesture following his promise to Mr. Winston Churchill, that he would put his life and soul for serving the territory under the British regime. His initial shock at the wilderness of the terrain and later gradual acceptance of it are reflected in his diary in such a manner that readers can empathize with him. His claim to Mariamu that he had gone there to help her and her people appeals to her and several others of her community who are grateful to the empirical powers for their control over the African soil. Native Africans were in awe of the colonizers who could bring railways in the wilderness of Africa and later are seen using airplanes during the havoc of the First World War that greatly puzzled the simple tribesmen.

All ended up believing the British powers as indomitable. The novel opens with the description of the happening town of Kikono, set up by Indian migrants from the Shamsi Muslim community, waiting for the formal approval from the British authorities whom Corbin represents. It is an irony that immigrants set up a town in their host land and await the legal approval from the colonizer while the natives are either ignored for being illiterate or are subjugated mostly by being coerced into conversion.

The later part of the novel deals with the investigatory project undertaken by Pius Fernandes, a retired school teacher in Dar es Salaam, who was given the diary of the then ADC Alfred Corbin by his erstwhile student Firoz with the intention of knowing its worth as a historical document. He depicts the changed face of the African territory in the postcolonial times where the same places existed with different names or vanished altogether like Kikono that actually got dismantled in the turbulent times of the First World War before getting the formal status of a town. The present paper endeavors to explore the fate of the liminal spaces described in the novel along with its impact on the people residing there. The changed nomenclature in postcolonial Africa in its struggle for doing away with the colonial influences and searching for their 'real' past also plays an important role in giving the places a different identity. In this novel M. G. Vassanji projects the viewpoint of Indian immigrants in Africa and addresses certain subtle issues relating to a person's identity in the postcolonial times when the conscious efforts of decolonization create complications in the lives of those immigrants who see the image of their home shattering before their eyes as they become strangers in the place where some of them had resided for generations.

ROLE OF COLONIZATION IN ALTERING IDENTITIES OF PEOPLE AND PLACES

As seen from several examples of colonized nations, the arrival of

colonizers altered the dynamics of identities of people and places. Places situated close to the shore, such as Mombasa in the context of Tanzania (erstwhile Tanganyika), gained importance as they served as the gateway for the emissaries of the colonizers. In the novel Alfred Corbin first lands in Mombasa and from there he is sent to Kikono after being handed over the charge as A.D.C. Kikono, though a small place, had gained importance due to its strategic location in terms of political boundaries that exposed it to an easy access from the German colony of Moshi and also because it was located close to the rail route of Voi. The introduction of railways in Africa demanded skilled labor force that the colonizers availed from their other colonies like India. In the context of the novel, Rashid, Mariamu's step-father; worked as a coolie at the railway station before the fear of lions scared him away to take shelter at Kikono. The arrival of people as workforce and also for the purpose of spreading their business, changed the demographic structure of the territory. The studies of Indian diaspora in East Africa revealed the motives behind mass-migration of people from India to Africa as follows: "Muslim merchants with firms in Bombay, Karachi, Mombasa, and Zanzibar exported East African ivory and cotton to India and imported everyday foodstuffs and consumer goods. Hindu and Muslim retailers took consignments of these imports on credit from wholesalers and sold them to Indian, European, and African clients in shops (dukkas) that they set up along the railway line."¹

It can be inferred from the novel that the British colonizers built good relations with Indian immigrants and with the native Africans they applied the policy of conversion; to facilitate the latter, a company station run by two ladies was established at the foothills of Mount Kilimanjaro. Corbin used to attend all the festivities organized by the Shamsi community and was on friendly terms with Mukhi Jamali. He enjoyed Indian hospitality quite often and as a result the Indian Shamsis had some influence over him which was not at all the case with his relations with the natives. The fact that the

Indian immigrants shared power with the colonizers, made them culprits in the eyes of the natives and thus the rift between the two communities increased.

The wilderness of the African terrain is described through the occidental point of view of Corbin in which occasionally the contempt of people like Maynard (the military man in the colonial service) for the place and for its natives is accentuated as the latter says, "This is a savage country, and it could turn you into a savage. It is so easy to be overcome by its savagery, to lose one's veneer of Western civilization."² Corbin sums up this paradoxical relationship between Maynard and the Africans by commenting, "He respected the African, yet would call him nigger. He loved animals. He had killed scores of both."³ Corbin describes his visit to Nairobi where he has to go for appearing for an examination testing his competence in the local language that was mandatory for all the officials serving in the imperial set-up. He calls Nairobi as 'man-made Nairobi' as opposed to places like Kikono, untouched by human interference. There he is surprised at the extent the Europeans had transformed the African city that it gave one an impression of being in a developed city in Europe full of amenities and resources for recreation. There Corbin becomes aware of the hierarchy of the places in Africa under the colonial empire:

This was the capital of the land, where the rulers lived, he told himself. From here the government and the secretariat sent directives to the provincial Commissioner in Mombasa, who directed Corbin's own master, the DC in Voi. This was the "up there", or the "God's eye view", in contrast to the "down here" or "worm's eye view" of the lowly ADCS.⁴

The hierarchy of places mentioned by Corbin changes in the decolonized Tanzania as Dar es Salaam, the city that had enjoyed limited popularity during the colonial era becomes its capital. In

1988, Pius Fernandes, refers to Corbin's diary along with several historical documents and correspondences, and becomes aware of the existence of places like Kikono that remained in the liminal zone and perished before formally coming into existence. Such was the destructive impact of skirmishes between the British and German colonies in East Africa that some territories were wiped off from the face of the map. Much later in the novel, Mariamu's son Ali Akbar Ali who rose to name and fame as an immigrant in England and posed as a chief's son in exile replied humorously when asked about his birthplace in an interview: "In a place that's not in any map. I wonder if it existed at all."⁵

RESHAPING THE HISTORY

The 'self-reflexive historical fiction' written by Vassanji enquires into the history of East Africa investigated by the involved narrator Pius Fernandes. The plot of the novel comprises sincere endeavors of reshaping the history of the place made by the narrator, an expatriate Indian who had spent the prime of his life teaching at a school in East Africa after his appointment by the colonial regime. An erstwhile history teacher in the Boyschool at Dar es Salaam, Pius loses his job in the independent Tanzania and is helped by his former student Firoz, who gives him the assignment of investigating the details in Alfred Corbin's diary. Though the diary did not sustain much curiosity for the general public, it is deemed as a valuable family asset by Rita, daughter-in-law of Pipa, who had cherished the diary all through his life. The secret that the diary contains may not have any value for others but for Rita it is the question of honour and identity of her family as it contains the truth about her husband Ali Akbar Ali's paternity. Though an estranged wife of Ali, Rita wants to bury the secret in order to save the honour and social position of her children. Pius, in spite of successful completion of his investigation, hands over the outcome to Rita only to be buried,

along with a promise that he would never let out the secrets that the diary contained. His sacrifice is a tribute to Rita whom he adored since the days of his youth but never dared to come close to, keeping in view the orthodox ways of her Shamsi community.

Pius resorts to old official documents, interviews of people who are related to those mentioned in the diary, reviewing the correspondence between people connected with each other through Corbin's diary and most of all personal observation of the places that were once the hub of activity during the imperial rule. From Mukhi Jamali's descendants, he gets to know how rising fortunes of the man who was to be the mayor of Kikono, turned upside down due to the First World War and consequent clashes between the British and German colonies of East Africa. Shortly after this sudden tragic turn in life, Mukhi breathed his last in Moshi, formerly occupied by the Germans. Pius recalls the memories of people of those days in which he mentions the game played by people to identify German soldiers by calling out 'Achtung!' (Meaning 'attention!' in German language) randomly, to which a German soldier would instinctively respond. This speaks of the marginalization of Germans in the place where they had once ruled respectfully. This shows that with time the fortunes of places as well as people change for better or for worse. Jamali's wife Khanoum's African origins were despised by the Shamsis after Mukhi's death and she was left to languish alone with her half African sons who later grew up hating Indians for their contempt and ingratitude towards their mother.

Pius's actual visit to Moshi is juxtaposed with his imagination of the place on the basis of Corbin's diary, where he imagined the battles being fought between the British and the German troops. In modern Tanzania the same place housed a cinema hall featuring the popular films from Hollywood as well as Bollywood. The contrast of war and peace is vividly described through the actual and imaginary visuals associated with the place. He gets to know that among occasional visitors to the place, there was a German couple who perhaps wanted

to recall their memories of the place when it was a home to them. Corbin happens to visit a church built in the 1930s where earlier Company Mission Station stood and strove to win the hearts of the natives by providing them with food and education. Even the remnants of the Missionary institution were not visible in Moshi, in independent Tanzania that looked with contempt at everything that made people recall the colonial period.

In the process of rebuilding history, Pius throws light upon the rise and fall of places and empires in the ever-changing power structures. He describes the town of Dar es Salaam since its foundation and the consequent of changing hands in occupying power over it. The once nondescript village located beside a perfect peaceful harbor had attracted the attention of the Sultan of Zanzibar who fashioned it into a town and named it Dar es Salaam, meaning 'Heaven of Peace'. "The Germans came and wrenched it from Arab hands; they built it up further, with beautiful white houses, roads, and monuments. It became now for the British, the main military base for the remainder of war."⁶ Later he goes on to recount, "As the forties arrived, Dar es Salaam was a booming town and a capital surpassing Zanzibar."⁷ After the end of the colonial rule, the same town was made the capital of independent Tanzania. This depicts the journey of a village from its insignificant status to its becoming the capital of its country within the timespan of half a century. While depicting the changed fortune of the place, Pius also explores the changed fortunes of its occupants like Nurmohammed Pipa who made money during the war by serving as a spy to both the parties at war. Some were destroyed by the war while some amassed a lot of wealth due to war. Pipa was among the beneficiaries. At the commencement of peace, he started a shop that catered to the daily needs of people in his locality and soon became a rich trader.

Pipa, who had built his world by the dint of hard labor and a good sense of business, went on to live in a two-storied building

'Amin Mansion' named after his second son Amin. However, Pipa's downfall began since the anti-colonial activists started marginalizing him on the basis of his Indian origins. They treated him rudely and threatened that like the British they would pack him off to his place of origin. Pipa, who hardly knew his own parentage, could not claim any place as his own besides Dar es Salaam where he had created a world out of nothing. At the onset of independence, apparently Pipa was invited as a guest for the ceremony of handing over of powers by the British to the natives, but actually the native Africans who had risen to power overnight, wanted to pose a threat to his existence on their land as they associated Pipa and other Indian immigrants with colonial rule. During the ceremony, a minor accident leads to the death of Pipa's son Amin foreshadowing the end of his power in his adopted land where soon after the independence of Tanzania, his property is confiscated and he dies in oblivion. His shop and house eventually are owned by his relative Firoz, Pius's student, who retrieves Corbin's diary from Pipa's belongings.

The novel, in its course throws light upon the interpersonal relations between the British colonizers, Indian immigrants and the native Africans. It is evident from the narrative that the Indian immigrants always kept the natives at bay and almost shared the power with the British colonizers by establishing friendly ties with them. This was partly due to the close-knit structure of their society and the feeling of insecurity as immigrants. They had taken British power over the land for granted and looked upon its end with disbelief. The native Africans, fighting for their freedom, sensed this attitude and started treating these wealthy immigrants with contempt. With the gaining of power by the natives, the decolonized nomenclature was introduced that resulted in renaming of streets, landmarks, shops etc. Everything in the independent country gained a new native identity and the culture that was so far relegated enjoyed the limelight. Long years of colonial rule and history of conversion had kept the natives

away from their history which was recreated by their leaders like Mwalimu, popularly addressed as the teacher who assumed power in the decolonized land.

In the broader agenda of decolonization, the identity of the immigrants came into question. The characters of Pipa, Pius and Gregory in the novel reflect their dilemma about their homeland. Pipa openly challenges the leaders of African Independence to find his origins so that they can send him back to his 'original' place. The winding up of the British Empire puts the careers of Pius and Gregory in jeopardy as narrated by Pius, "We were intensely aware of our essential homelessness. Our world was diminishing with the empire. We were all travelers who had on an impulse taken off, for all kinds of personal reasons, yes, but surely also to pursue a career we had all chosen—to teach."⁸ The idea of home was elusive as they had spent the prime of their youth in Dar es Salaam. Gregory, an Englishman had even abandoned his British citizenship in favour of his African one when the question of choice between the two arose as a result of the rule made by a new government. His popularity as an English teacher started waning in the course of time and he died a lonely and unacknowledged death. Before his death he had documented his experiences in turbulent East Africa with specific reference to Dar es Salaam in the form of a collection of poetry entitled 'Havin' a Piece intending a pun at the meaning of Dar es Salaam as 'Heaven of Peace'. Pius, a Goanese Portuguese had left his native place for joining a position as a teacher in the British colony of Africa and homeland for him was merely a concept considering the changed circumstances of Goa after the departure of the Portuguese. Thus all these three characters were rendered as anathema in independent Tanzania.

SIGNIFICANCE OF CHANGED IDENTITIES

In his narrative, Vassanji intermingles different images of Dar es

Salaam at different periods of time as the place had witnessed too many changes as a result of changing power structures. The transition from being under the power of the Sultan of Zanzibar to having its own governance in modern Tanzania was not sudden as the place had been subjected to the dominion of two different European colonies. The narrator of *The Book of Secrets* Pius Fernandes, focuses on the changed nomenclature and especially on names of the popular places that had undergone change leading a person to feel like an outsider in one's own place. When he meets Rita in a café on Somora Avenue, he recalls that it used to be Independence Avenue earlier and Acacia Avenue even before that. The changes in names of places and change in the lifestyle of people (Khanga, the traditional dress of Swahili people was hardly worn by people in modern Tanzania of late 1980s), is suggestive of changed identities of people.

The change of power from the British to the natives was celebrated on Kichwele Street with a lot of fanfare. The street henceforth was renamed as Uruhu Street as the word 'uruhu' in the local language meant freedom. The ceremony is described from Pipa's point of view who watches the familiar red-white-and-blue flag that he had first seen at ADC's office at Kikono, being taken off and its place is taken by the new flag, carving a new identity for Tanzania. The ritual of changing of flags was followed by the farewell speech by the Queen's husband and African leader Mwalimu's speech making promises to his people. The narrator Pius remarks that the early years of independence were the years of political euphoria and self-confidence in the new nation. Soon the need for an alignment was felt which fell eastwards paving the way for an earnest socialism.⁹ The inevitable change thereafter led to governmental control over all institutions including that of the Boyschool where Pius served and was made to accept retirement as according to the rules of the government he was past his age of retirement. This serves as an example of how the change in power and policies affected people at large. In the course of unravelling a much broader plot dealing with

the impact of colonization on the history of the world, the writer also juxtaposes the fate of two liminal zones namely Kikono and Dar es Salaam: one went into oblivion and the other rose to fame as the most important city in modern Tanzania.

Throughout the novel Vassanji uses select untranslatable vocabulary from the native African language as a tool for substantiating the process of decolonization as suggested by famous postcolonial writer-critic Salman Rushdie who opines, “The language, like so much else in the colonies, needs to be decolonized.”¹⁰ By intertwining personal history as well as history of a place, the writer has explored the subtle impact of change over people and places and how both remain in constant flux given the dynamics of change in political borders and power structures. The novel also throws light upon the impact that colonization has brought about over the history of the entire world.

NOTES

- 1 Aiyar, Sana, ‘Out of India: East Africa and its South Asian Diasporas’, *Routledge Handbook of the Indian Diaspora*, ed. Ajaya Kumar Sahoo, Radha Sarma Hegde, (New York: Routledge Tylor and Francis Group, 2018), p. 64.
- 2 Vassanji, M. G. *The Book of Secrets*, (Delhi: Worldview Publications, 1994), p.19.
- 3 Vassanji, M. G. *The Book of Secrets*, (Delhi: Worldview Publications, 1994), p.19.
- 4 Vassanji, M. G. *The Book of Secrets*, (Delhi: Worldview Publications, 1994), p.59.
- 5 Vassanji, M. G. *The Book of Secrets*, (Delhi: Worldview Publications, 1994), p.306.
- 6 Vassanji, M. G. *The Book of Secrets*, (Delhi: Worldview Publications, 1994), p.187.
- 7 Vassanji, M. G. *The Book of Secrets*, (Delhi: Worldview Publications, 1994), p.210.
- 8 Vassanji, M. G. *The Book of Secrets*, (Delhi: Worldview Publications, 1994), p.257.
- 9 Vassanji, M. G. *The Book of Secrets*, (Delhi: Worldview Publications, 1994), p.286.
- 10 McLeod, John, *Beginning Postcolonialism*, (Delhi: Viva Books, 2010), p.22.

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