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“Not this, not that”: In-between Identities in *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall* by M.G. Vassanji

Abstract

How useful is it to define Canadian literature as postcolonial literature? Can we talk about Canadian multicultural identities as postcolonial, or has the adjective “postcolonial” lost its usefulness when discussing “Canadian identity” as an umbrella term? Has “postcolonial” instead become reserved for the description of only a part of its spectrum: the hyphenated and/or immigrant identities coming from (other) former British colonies, now settled in Canada? The paper addresses these questions by focusing on the novel *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall* by M.G. Vassanji (2003). Following the unravelling of the main character’s memories and the juxtaposition of his life as an immigrant in Canada in the present to his life as a descendant of Indian immigrants in Kenya in the past, the paper analyzes the ways in which the novel debates the key issues of belonging, race and dislocation and their relation to the idea of individual identity.

Résumé

Est-il bien utile de définir la littérature canadienne comme une littérature post-coloniale? Pouvons-nous évoquer les identités multiculturelles canadiennes comme des identités post-coloniales, ou cet adjectif a-t-il perdu sa pertinence en tant que terme parapluie en ce qui concerner l’« identité canadienne » ? Le « post-colonial » est-il désormais plutôt réservé à la description d’une partie seulement de son éventail, à savoir les identités « à trait d’union » et/ou immigrantes venant d’(autres) anciennes colonies britanniques, venues se fixer au Canada ? Le présent article pose ces questions à partir du roman *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall*, de M.G. Vassanji (2003). Suivant le dévidage des souvenirs du personnage principal, avec la juxtaposition de sa vie d’immigrant au Canada dans le présent et de sa vie de descendant d’immigrants indiens au Kenya dans le passé, l’article analyse les façons dont le roman traite les questions clés de l’appartenance, de la race et de la dislocation, ainsi que leur relation avec l’idée d’identité individuelle.

The location of “the postcolonial”

Labelling is the necessary evil, a side-product of literary analysis, and finding appropriate shelves and nooks is part and parcel of the critical process. As useful as labelling generally is, sometimes it can limit interpretation by assigning certain assumptions about an author onto a text through the imposition of author-related labels. This paper will mainly address the following questions and their relation to the novel *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall* by M.G.

Vassanji (2003): What does "postcolonial" mean in the Canadian context? If it is to be taken as a valuable term in a discussion of Canadian literature, who is it reserved for? How useful can the category be in the case of immigrant culturally hybrid writers, like Vassanji?

I find the case of Vassanji particularly interesting for a discussion of Canadian identity and the question of (identifying) the idea of belonging. Vassanji has been variously described as either one or several of the following adjectives: immigrant/ dislocated/ diasporic/ postcolonial/ hyphenated/ hybrid/ multicultural author. Also, he has been labelled as either Canadian, South-Asian, African, Tanzanian, Commonwealth, or a(ny) combination of these.¹ As useful as umbrella terms are when trying to give a broader picture, they prove to be misleading and inadequate for an explication of particular contexts. Vassanji is a good example. Usually he is talked of as a Canadian South Asian or just Asian-Canadian writer; however, Vassanji's Asianness is of a particular kind: coming from Kenya via Tanzania. Like his character Vikram Lall, he is seen both as belonging and not belonging. Where Vikram's in-between position is the source of his continuously denied sense of belonging, Vassanji's multiply hyphenated in-between identity has put him in a curious location within the body of Canadian literature. In writing on Vassanji we are thus confronted with the difficulty of defining belonging, and we are also faced with a need to define, label, identify, and explain within given categories. These categories, however, more often than not tell us more about the critic's own views on belonging than they do about the ideas of belonging expressed in the fiction itself.

As Susheila Nasta has pointed out in a discussion about multiculturalism within a British context,

despite the wide-ranging and often cross-cultural concerns of many of these writers, the literary establishment in Britain has persistently tended either to package those from mixed cultural or migrant postcolonial backgrounds into the convenient pockets of separate national traditions or alternatively to stitch them together according to racial derivation or country of origin, regardless of specific histories or individual preoccupations. Consequently the so-called "colonial", "Commonwealth" or "postcolonial" links of these writers are heightened and the often significant differences between them subsumed by a reviewing practice that misleadingly levels out important contextual issues of history, politics, generation or location. (Nasta, 2)

A similar vein can be perceived in writing about Canadian literature, especially that literature that gets labelled "multicultural". Writers of ethnically different background ("different" in this case denoting non-English or non-French understood in the broad linguistic sense) are always invariably identified by a hyphen that connects the country/culture of their heritage to the Canadian identity. While this hyphen can be understood as a badge of honour and a proof of multiculturalism in practice that defies acculturation and asserts the right to difference within Canada, it can at the same time be perceived as that small but significant barrier limit-

1) As Jamie James has pointed out, labelling Vassanji is a complicated venture: "Could anyone call him an Indian-African-Canadian novelist and keep a straight face? Vassanji is sometimes called a Tanzanian writer, but that doesn't seem right either; he was fourteen years old when the country was created and the socialist nation that Tanzania would become was a very different place from the Commonwealth nation of Tanganyika, whose President, Julius Nyerere, translated Shakespeare into Swahili" (James, 128).



ing "Canadian proper" from "Canadian hyphenated". And hence the hyphen itself becomes that point where a discussion of what "Canadian" means re-emerges yet again. More often than not, the hyphen in question reminds of Canada's colonial past and the many diverse ties it has inherited with the rest of the former colonies of the British Empire, with many of the identities now attached to the Canadian part of the equation by the hyphen bringing to mind the vast postcolonial map of the world. Which, in turn, reminds one of Canada's own (post)colonial experience.

Looking at the term "postcolonial", it becomes obvious that it ceases to be a useful term once it is used in a generalized way wherein the context of each separate cultural /regional experience of colonialism becomes unimportant, glossed over through generalizations about power relations between the colonizer and the colonized. When looking at the case of Canadian literature within different textbooks on postcolonial literature, more often than not one finds it reduced to a side remark or a footnote reserved for the co-called "white-settler colonies" which it shares with Australia and New Zealand (see *The Empire Writes Back* by Ashcroft et al, for an example).² Once these supposedly unproblematic postcolonial literatures are safely out of the way relegated to the realm of a side-remark, the attention of the textbooks is invariably turned to the question of postcoloniality in the supposedly more deserving contexts of India or South Africa. The presumption primarily is that "postcolonial" ceased to have a vital meaning for "white settler" literatures and that it has been reduced to the sphere of chronology of historical events, to the realm of "post-colonial" as Elleke Boehmer defines it (here, yet again, the hyphen bears the semantic significance).³

The universal agreement seems to be that in the case of Canada "postcolonial" is not a useful term, as it is seen to be adequate primarily or only when it denotes the historical aspect of

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- 2) Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin do point out to the crucial question at the heart of Canadian identity and the identity of Canadian literature: "In Canada, where the model of the 'mosaic' has been an important cultural determinant, Canadian literary theory has, in breaking away from European domination, generally retained a nationalist stance, arguing for the mosaic as characteristically Canadian in contrast to the 'melting-pot' of the USA. But the internal perception of a mosaic has not generated corresponding theories of literary hybridity to replace the nationalist approach. Canadian literature, perceived internally as a mosaic, remains generally monolithic in its assertion of Canadian difference from the canonical British or the more recently threatening neo-colonialism of American culture" (Ashcroft et al, 36). I have quoted extensively here because I find the analysis that Ashcroft Griffiths and Tiffin gave back in 1989 still, disturbingly enough, valid and applicable for the dominant perception of Canada within Canada. This is changing gradually, but the impression is that the Canadian own view of Canadanness as hybrid rather than just hyphenated and divided into subsections of the multicultural whole is still some time away from becoming the dominant view
 - 3) The exact quote runs as: "While Vikram has sought refuge in 'clement' Canada, his new country seems barely to impinge on his consciousness, intent as he is on recording his past in a distant, dangerous land. Vassanji belongs to a distinguished group of foreign-born Canadian writers, notably Bombay-born Rohinton Mistry and Sri Lanka-born Michael Ondaatje, who use their new country as a sort of parking lot. Unlike Monica Ali and Zadie Smith, whose novels take place in bustling London immigrant neighbourhoods, and unlike Jhumpa Lahiri, whose stories unfold in suburban South Asian American homes, Canada's multicultural writers prefer to train their visions back on their abandoned homes" (Jacinto, 31). I would suggest that Jacinto forgets the fact that Ali, Smith and Lahiri are all second generation immigrants born in Britain and the US and as such live and write about this experience of multiculturalism. All three Canadian authors she chastises for directing their gaze to the countries in which they were born are "foreign born" to use her expression, and as such write from an immigrant or exilic perspective, which, unsurprisingly enough (as Trinh Minh-ha pointed out in her article on dislocated writing), is almost always primarily directed at the country left behind and deals in some way with the aspects of the autobiographical (Minh-ha, 10).

the experience, meaning "after colonization," after separation from the metropolitan centre (hence, Boehmer's "post-colonial" with a hyphen). Otherwise, it is seen as inadequate for a description of Canadian experience, which is instead perceived to be better described as multicultural.

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The subject matter of Vassanji's novel *The In-between World of Vikram Lall* is a perfect example of this. Vassanji describes the memories of Vikram Lall, a descendant of Indian labourers in east coast Africa (Kenya today), who is recollecting his childhood and growing up in the former British colony. His own growing up parallels Kenya's struggle for independence. His recollections are narrated from the safety of a small town by Lake Ontario, which is juxtaposed to the turbulent Africa of his past that he, as a corrupt civil servant, eventually fled from. Vikram's Canada, in fact, is described as a "clement country", a safe haven from the turbulent world – not just Africa, but also the war-stricken madness of the Balkans. From this safe distance, of a wealthy neighbourhood muffled with snow, the narrative safely unfolds into the violent past and, in the end, dangerous present:

A lonely and odd threesome we form, with out tortuous histories and migratory roots, in this small-town haven, when burgeoning Toronto is just two hours away with its India- and Chinatowns and people among whom we would seem only too commonplace. There's a savage war on in the Balkans, and from that perspective my memories are of a time ages and ages away. A humbling thought: the First World War was closer to that time of my childhood during the Emergency than the present time is to it. (Vassanji, 93-4)

Vassanji describes Canada in terms of a sanctuary and neutral ground, and the snowy cityscape serves as a narrative centre from which Vikram's flashbacks are conveyed and connected into a narrative. I would disagree with Leela Jacinto, who claims that this background presence of Canada in the novel "barely impinges on the narrator's consciousness". Instead of Jacinto's description of Vassanji's treatment of (and attitude to) Canada as that of a "parking lot"⁴ (adding Mistry and Ondaatje to the accusation) from which he narrates stories set somewhere else (Jacinto 31), implying its irrelevance for the rest of the novel, I would suggest that Vassanji's description of Canada as a safe haven is pivotal for the unravelling of the exilic narrator's description of colonial and postcolonial relations in East Africa. Moreover, I would suggest that the discussion of the colonial and postcolonial relations (and in particular, those of race) is the central issue of the novel, for an understanding of which the concept "postcolonial" comes in as most useful.

4) Boehmer makes a semantic distinction between the two versions of the word – "post-colonial" and "postcolonial": to the former version she assigns the historical/chronological meaning (as designating a period after colonialism), and to the later that of the adjective describing critical challenges to colonialism and the idea of empire (Boehmer, 3).



Race, belonging and the postcolonial Other

When analysing the colonial and postcolonial relations described in *The In-Between World*, a generalized understanding of key postcolonial concepts becomes useless, for in the context of East Africa (more specifically, that of Tanzania and Kenya) calling both Asians and Africans as racial others, lumped together as the "subaltern" and "oppressed", glosses over the important racial, cultural and political relationships between these two roughly grouped communities in relation to the white, predominantly English, settlers-colonizers. Thus the predictable opposition colonizer-colonised based on racial difference to the coloniser alone fails.

Looking at the novel, one finds that the novel's main focus is on the position of the Asians described as an in-between race and culture within the opposition coloniser-colonised, neither one nor the other. Vassanji's narrator muses over this when comparing himself to his African friend Njoroge: "I was also aware that he was more from Africa than I was. He was African, I was Asian. His skin was matte, his woolly hair impossibly alien. I was smaller, with pointed elvish ears, my skin annoyingly 'medium', as I described it then, neither one (white) nor the other (black)" (Vassanji, 25). The in-between position is further stressed by the narrator when Njoroge discusses their mutual childhood friends: "'They were your friends, Annie and Bill, let's face it – more than they were mine.' Gentle taunt; echo of a sentiment long harboured. And I the guilty one in the middle, the *perilous in-between*" (Vassanji, 279, italics mine).

The in-between position of the Asians in the novel is continuously described as perilous and uneasy; they are defined as not truly belonging in Africa despite their professed allegiance to it. Through a narrative about the Lall family, Vassanji reminds of the specific experience of Indian migration to Africa which created a particular situation of an in-between race within the context of the opposition white/European/colonizer versus black/African/colonized.⁵ It is the case of an in-between – and often, go-between – class that Vassanji describes: the class of railway workers, later shop-keepers and merchants; neither white nor black, but suspiciously brown; belonging to neither of the two opposed sides, suspicious to both.

What Vassanji keeps on coming back to is the very feeling of not quite belonging, of not being accepted, either by the Europeans or the Africans:

I told myself how desperately I loved this country that somehow could not quite accept me. Was there really something prohibitively negative in me, and in those like me, with our alien forbidding skins off which the soul of Africa simply slipped away? (325)

Moreover, the sense of not belonging is further stressed with the image of in-betweenness that Vikram sees as the main characteristic of his own position, and which is in turn later taken to be the main characteristic of the Asian position in general:

5) These musings are underlined with a sense that acceptance will never truly be found: "To the African I would always be the Asian, the Shylock; I would never escape that suspicion, that stigma" (Vassanji, 286). Vassanji here employs the cultural capital of Shakespeare to further support this claim and to in turn reassert the cultural links of Vikram and his community to the Empire's metropolis.

I couldn't help feeling that both Bill and Njoroge were *genuine*, in their very different ways; only I, who stood in the middle, Vikram Lall, cherished son of an Indian grocer, sounded false to myself, rang hollow like a bad penny. (Vassanji, 49, my italics)

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The word "genuine" here invokes the spectre of authenticity: racial relations come to reflect the Asian community members' growing anxieties about belonging in Kenya after the independence. The narrator's frustration is described as a feeling of being caught in the middle of a colonial encounter between the Europeans and Africans the rules of which were already set upon the Asians' arrival:

I would like to defend myself against that charge, give a finer shade of meaning, a context, to my relationship with the Africans around me. I wish I could explain to Joseph, a descendant of those people, that that world was not of my devising. But I fear I already sound too earnest. (32)

The inter-racial tensions grow more and more pronounced as nationalism and nation-building intensify after Kenyan independence. From an African perspective, voiced through Njoroge, the in-between position of Asians in Africa is described in the following terms: "You were in with the whites, so you had power over us. And you were so alien, more so than the whites. We never know what you think. You are so inscrutable, you Indians" (92). The colonial history therefore does not stop to haunt the postcolonial present of the Asians; it does not let either side to forget the context of their immigration to East Africa: as part of the British colonial administration. In this way, the in-between position of the Asian community in East Africa becomes the site of constant anxieties about racial difference and belonging of its individual members. As a result, most of them eventually emigrate, more or less reluctantly. One of the reluctant ones, pushed west primarily due to his own shenanigans and involvement in government corruption, turns out to be the narrator himself, and it is from this dislocated, exilic perspective that Vikram narrates the story of Asians in Kenya.

Dislocation, diasporic perspective and postcoloniality

Besides stressing the in-between position of Asians in Africa, Vikram Lall the narrator keeps on stressing his own position as an in-between figure, torn between the two worlds separated by the Atlantic. On the one hand he longs for the place of his birth and youth, describing the early years with considerable nostalgia, expressing a feeling of love and belonging to it; on the other he ruefully describes the denial of this belonging by the African countrymen he experienced. However, his professed sense of belonging and allegiance to Kenya is not only questioned and doubted by his friends and colleagues, but also by the reader herself. Because Vikram refuses to take a moral stance to corruption, because he does not even try to react in any way to the position of a go-between in the money-laundering carried by the corrupt Kenyan government, his supposed allegiance to Kenya and his friend Njoroge does not hold water. His attempt at redeeming himself at the end of the novel again falls flat: it appears that



he doing it for selfish reasons, to placate *himself* and make himself feel better about himself. His main fault seems to be his composure and general lack of passion, which can otherwise be found galore in all the characters that surround him.

Major issues raised by this novel, therefore, are those of race and belonging. The racial intolerance toward the Asians in Kenya and their subsequent migration from the country is shown as the first sign of the snowballing progression of ethnic violence in Africa that has led to the massacres of the likes in Rwanda. Who belongs? Whose country is it? As Asians leave, the local ethnic nations turn against each other: Kikuyu, Massai, Lau – after all, Kenyan never was an ethnic term. The bright promise of the first years after independence from colonial rule, the years of optimism when everything seemed possible – even an inter-racial marriage of Vikram's sister Deepa to his Kikuyu friend Njoroge – is lost with gradual corruption of the people in power and their entrenchment

In contrast to everything and everyone around him, Vikram does not show any deep emotion or any passion in the novel. The only love he had and lost was the childhood affection for little Annie, whose death by Mau Mau guerrilla decidedly marked the death of Vikram's inner emotions. Could this have been an excuse, this loss, for never having felt anything? Could this description of premature affection in terms of stunted feelings be reflecting Kenya's stunted growth after independence?

If we take the latter view as a starting point in the interpretation, we would be following in Fredric Jameson's footsteps outlined as early as 1986 in his much debated article "Third World Text in the Era of Multinational Capitalism". Third World texts for Jameson are devoid of a split between the private and public, and even the most private accounts are necessarily allegories of "the public third-world culture and society" and eventually end up retelling the tale of the collective experience (Jameson, 69). In this case, the text in question only marginally fits the description "Third World": it is *about* a "Third World" country written by an author who comes *from* a "Third World" country; however, both the narrator's and the author's perspectives are dislocated, anchored in what is described as the First World safety of Canada, thousands of miles away from the Third World location of the story. The narrator's point of view, moreover, is that of an exile.

What is more, the narrative perspective of Vassanji (to an extent reflecting that of his narrator) in this novel is partly autobiographical: he draws from his own lived experience as a member of the Indian community in Tanzania and Kenya for inspiration and subject-matter. "The postcolonial" in his writing is the postcolonial experience of Africa (both with and without the hyphen) on the one hand, and the postcolonial experience of dislocation resulting from the unravelling of the British Empire, reminding one of the intricate networks of inter-relations among the former colonies which continue to exist after the Empire's disintegration. Seen within the context of post-colonial migration movements of peoples, Canada emerges as one of the countries (Australia and New Zealand being other obvious examples) where multiculturalism and migration have been greatly affected by the repercussions of colonial history. It is at the intersections of postcoloniality (understood here following Graham Huggan's work on "postcolonial exotic") and multiculturalism that Vassanji's work as a hyphenated Canadian author should be understood. Huggan states that

[‘postcolonial’ on one level] refers to an ongoing process of ‘cultural embattlement’ (Suleri 1992b): postcolonialism, in this context, denotes ‘an index of resistance, a perceived imperative to rewrite the social text of continuing imperative dominance’ (Huggan 1996: 3).[D]istinction between *postcolonialism* and *postcoloniality*. The first of these concerns largely localized agencies of resistance, the second refers to a global condition of cross-cultural exchange. (Huggan 2001: ix)

Taking Huggan’s distinction between “postcoloniality” and “postcolonialism” into consideration, Vassanji’s novel – as well as his migratory experience, which in a way uncannily mirrors his narrator’s to an extent – falls within the realm of postcoloniality. There is nothing much that would define this text as an agent of resistance or as a text questioning the supposed superiority of the colonial centre. Britain, the British Empire, England and London are all described in terms of nostalgic affection. Vikram’s parents – his father in particular – show the kind of professed subservience mixed with adulation of the British that borders on the disturbing. Yet, it never tips over into the realm of the distasteful or disturbing, nor is it ever subverted or questioned. Vikram’s own nostalgic view of his childhood and his affection for the English girl add to this sentimental view of the Empire in Africa.

The cross-cultural exchange of postcoloniality brings both Vikram and Vassanji to Canada, and their perspective is first and foremost dislocated. Vassanji has been called an immigrant author a number of times, but, just like in the cases of Mistry and Ondaatje whom he tends to be grouped with, the definition “immigrant author” does not really sit well. The foremost reason for this is the fact that immigrant authors are expected to (and generally do) write about the immigrant experience in their new homeland. However, Vassanji’s novels dealing with the immigrant experience of Canada are considered to be his weakest points (*No New Land, Amriika*). What Vassanji (as well as Mistry and Ondaatje) excel at is the sphere of the semi-autobiographical. His writing about the Asian experience in east coast Africa, whether from a dislocated narrative point of view or that of the omniscient observer (as in the short story collection *Uhuru Street*) are the spheres where Vassanji excels at. In the light of this, it would perhaps be more accurate to call Vassanji an exilic author. A similar conclusion is reached by Jamie James, who, in writing about Rohinton Mistry, compares Mistry’s writing to that of Vassanji and concludes that

[p]erhaps the reason that Vassanji’s and Mistry’s attempts to write about the immigrant experience fall flat is that they themselves aren’t immigrants in the usual sense but rather exiles. (...)Immigrants come to a place precisely in order to leave the old country behind, to make a new home; exiles cannot do that. (James, 130)

Moreover, as writers in exile, they are capable of speaking out about certain political matters in a way their colleagues back home could not, as Vassanji openly put it discussing his novel *The Gunny Sack* in an interview with Susheila Nasta:

The objective was just to record a life, and the lives on which that life – that is the life of my generation – was based. But I think because I lived away from my country it was easier for me to convey. I could name the country. I could name the political leaders. I could name actual events which many

other African writers have not been able to do or have refused to do. In that sense the novel becomes very political because it obviously has a stand on real political events and real political figures. (...) We cannot disassociate our lives from politics, from the politics of the continent. We are what we are right now because of certain political decisions made nationally and internationally (Nasta, 73).

Postcolonial, then, can safely be said to be a useful term in discussing Canadian literature, especially when discussing the so-called multicultural authors like Vassanji who bring a dislocated postcolonial perspective into their new homeland. Writing by Vassanji, Mistry and Ondaatje draws the reader's attention to the cross-cultural relations within Canada and the world in general in the wake of colonial demise, at the same time reminding of Canada's own colonial past. The state of cultural flux their writing reminds us of testifies to the ongoing process of postcoloniality and results in cultural hybridity that should be embraced and studied as part of Canadian literature proper, not just as a sanitized and (through a hyphen) separated sub-section of it. However, having accepted the state of postcoloniality as the current state of Canada and the world, there still remains the challenge of grappling with postcolonialism and identifying Canadian literature's position within this process.

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