



‘Revisiting Home Memory in M. G. Vassanji's *And Home Was Kariakoo: A Memoir of East Africa*’

Dr. Neeta Lalwani^{1*}, Mr. Manoj Dongre²

^{1*}Associate Professor, Department of English MATS University, Raipur, (C.G.)

²Research Scholar, Department of English MATS University, Raipur(C.G.)

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ABSTRACT

M.G. Vassanji's tale blends personal memories with the political and social history of the region, particularly focusing on the Indian diaspora, colonial legacies and the struggles for postcolonial identity. Vassanji's *And Home Was Kariakoo: A Memoir of East Africa* (2014) deals with exploration of memory and belonging as he visits to his hometown Dar es Salaam in Tanzania. This paper examines the theme of recalling home memory in M.G. Vassanji's *And Home Was Kariakoo: A Memoir of East Africa* (2014). It is a work in which the historical and cultural fabric of East Africa is woven with personal his memories. This paper is an attempt to examine how the author has shown that memory shapes identity within the flux of migration and postcolonial transformation. Vassanji, a Canadian author of Indian descent born in Kenya and raised in Tanzania, returns to his childhood landscapes Dar es Salaam, Zanzibar, and beyond to explore how memory The memoir reflects on the notion of ‘home’ as both a physical place and an emotional construct, revealing the interplay between nostalgia, displacement, and belonging. Through this lens, the text brightens the broader East African experience, offering insights into the continuing resonance of personal and collective pasts.

His memoir is based on the theme of ‘home’ which is a fluid and multifaceted concept for Vassanji. For the author, Kariakoo, the busy neighborhood of Dar es Salaam, becomes a metaphor for the complex interplay between belonging and exile. Vassanji reflects on the emotional pull of his birthplace his sense of alienation as a member of the Indian diaspora and the shifting dynamics of identity over time. The research work is imbued with a deep sense of nostalgia, but it also struggles with the inevitable changes brought by time and history.

Key Words: Home, Identity, Memory, Migration, Diaspora

Introduction

M.G. Vassanji is a renowned Canadian author of Indian descent, born in Nairobi, Kenya, and raised in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. A two-time Giller Prize winner for his novels *The Book of Secrets* (1994) and *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall* (2003), he also received the Governor General's Literary Award for Non-Fiction for *A Place Within: Rediscovering India* (2009). His works often explore themes of identity, migration, and the complexities of belonging, drawing from his multicultural experiences across East Africa, India, and North America. *And Home Was Kariakoo: A Memoir of East Africa*, published in 2014, is an emotional combination of travelogue, memoir, and historical reflection. In this work, Vassanji revisits his East African roots, tracing his childhood in Tanzania and Kenya while exploring the region's evolving landscapes and cultures. From the bustling streets of Dar es Salaam to the coastal villages of Zanzibar, the *And Home Was Kariakoo: A Memoir of East Africa* intertwines personal memory with a broader narrative of East Africa's colonial and postcolonial history, offering an insider's perspective on a land that continues to shape his identity.

Moyez Gulamhussein Vassanji, known as M.G. Vassanji, was born on May 30, 1950, in Nairobi, Kenya, to a family of Indian origin. His parents belonged to the Ismaili Muslim community, and their ancestors had migrated from Gujarat, India, to East Africa, part of a broader historical migration of South Asians to the

region. The Indian community in East Africa, including Kenya and Tanzania was involved primarily in trade, business, and service sectors, forming a significant minority in the British colonial administration. Though born in Kenya, Vassanji spent most of his childhood and formative years in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. Growing up in a multicultural environment, Vassanji was exposed to a variety of languages, traditions, and cultural influences, including Gujarati, Swahili, English, and the lingering impact of British colonialism. This early experience of living in a diaspora, shaped by multiple identities, laid the foundation for the themes that would later dominate his literary work.

M.G. Vassanji's *And Home Was Kariakoo: A Memoir of East Africa* offers a deep exploration of memory, identity and the concept of home. Vassanji, a prolific writer of the South Asian diaspora, invites readers into a personal and collective journey through the streets of Kariakoo, a historic district in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. As a memoir, the text not only chronicles the author's return to a place that shaped his identity but also examines the layered complexities of revisiting one's homeland after a prolonged absence. William Safran said about diaspora community, "They retain a collective memory, vision, or myth about their original homeland-its physical location, history, and achievements" (Safran, 83). At the heart of book is the theme of memory specifically, how memories of a place that was once home can shift over time and how the act of returning home becomes a powerful exercise in reconstructing one's past. Vassanji's memoir transcends a personal reflection on his own identity and, through a diasporic lens, explores broader issues of migration, colonialism, and the evolving nature of home. This research paper examines how Vassanji revisits and reconstructs his memory of home in *And Home Was Kariakoo: A Memoir of East Africa*. Through themes of nostalgia, loss, and the shifting meanings of home, Vassanji's memoir engages with the complexities of identity, the nature of memory, and the enduring emotional impact of displacement.

Narrative Style of M.G. Vassanji's Writing

M.G. Vassanji's writing is characterized by its complex narrative structure, blending personal and historical stories, often spanning multiple generations and geographies. His works are marked by a sense of melancholy, as his characters frequently struggle with the loss of identity, home, and belonging. Memory plays a crucial role in his narratives, serving as both a source of comfort and a reminder of past traumas. Vijay Mishra states that "In this case of diaspora the fantasy of the homeland is linked to that recollected trauma that stands for the sign of having been wrenched from one's mother (father) land" (Mishra 16). In addition to exploring the legacy of colonialism and the experience of the Indian diaspora in East Africa, Vassanji's works address broader questions about the human condition, how we reconcile ourselves with the past, how history shapes our present and how individuals navigate the complexities of identity in a globalized world.

Memory and the Diasporic Identity

Memory, as portrayed in *And Home Was Kariakoo: A Memoir of East Africa* is deeply personal but also inseparable from the collective experiences of the East African South Asian community. Vassanji said, "That feeling about my African home would never change over the years and decades that followed, during which I would go to many places, including Canada, which gave me a home, and my India ancestral homeland, which partially claimed me back" (AKWK 1-2). Vassanji's return to Kariakoo is more than a physical journey it is an emotional pilgrimage into his own past, where memories of growing up in East Africa intertwine with his identity as part of the South Asian diaspora. Famke Stock argues, "Memories of the home are no factual reproductions of a fixed past. Rather they are fluid reconstructions set against the backdrop of the remembering subject's current positioning and conceptualizations of home" (Stock 24). In the memoir, Vassanji explores how his memory of Kariakoo is fragmented and shaped by both personal and historical events. The experiences of South Asians in East Africa, particularly during the colonial period, have been marked by migration, economic success, and political challenges. Vassanji's memories of Kariakoo are thus not just recollections of childhood but are informed by broader socio-political realities that shaped the lives of the South Asian community. Stuart Hall said that, "Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and differences" (Hall 235). His reflections are often framed by questions of belonging and identity questions that are complicated by the dual heritage of being Indian and African in a postcolonial world.

For Vassanji, the notion of home is no longer fixed but fluid, changing as he moves between continents and lives in multiple worlds. Robin Cohen argues that

Home' became increasingly vague, even miasmic, while all ethnicities, they suggested, had to be dissolved into their component parts and surrounding context-divided by gender, class and race and other segments and enveloped by a world of intersectionality, multiculturalism and fluidity" (Cohen 9).

His return to Kariakoo evokes both a sense of familiarity and separation, as he is confronted with how much has changed since he left East Africa. William Safran rightly points out that one of his third characteristics of diaspora, "They regard their ancestral homeland as their true, ideal home and as the place to which they or their descendants would (or should) eventually return-when conditions are appropriate" (Safran, 83). This duality is characteristic of the diasporic experience, where the homeland exists simultaneously as a tangible reality and an idealized memory. The memoir captures the tension between these two visions of home, with Kariakoo symbolizing not just a physical space but a repository of memories that shape Vassanji's understanding of himself.

Nostalgia plays an essential role in Vassanji's memoir, coloring his memories of Kariakoo with a sense of longing for a past that no longer exists. His return to Dar es Salaam is a confrontation with the passage of time, as the streets, buildings, and people he once knew have changed, sometimes beyond recognition. In this way, the memoir is an exploration of loss not just the loss of a place, but the loss of a version of oneself that was tied to that place. However, Vassanji's nostalgia is not merely sentimental. Instead, it serves as a tool for understanding the complexities of the diasporic condition. The memoir illustrates how nostalgia can simultaneously be an expression of attachment to the past and a critique of the present. Vassanji's longing for the Kariakoo of his youth is tempered by his awareness of the political and social realities of postcolonial East Africa, where the changes wrought by time are not always for the better.

The loss that Vassanji feels upon returning to Kariakoo is multilayered. On one level, it is the loss of physical landmarks that once held personal significance. On another, it is the loss of community, as many of the people who once inhabited Kariakoo have migrated elsewhere or passed away. Yet, perhaps the greatest loss is the realization that the past can never be fully reclaimed, even when one physically returns to the places where that past was lived. This theme of loss is intricately tied to the memoir's exploration of time and memory. Vassanji's recollections are not static; they evolve as he revisits Kariakoo and are reinterpreted in light of his current experiences. In this sense, memory becomes an active process of meaning-making, where the past is constantly reconstructed through the lens of the present.

The Concept of Home

In *And Home Was Kariakoo: A Memoir of East Africa*, the concept of home is fluid and continually evolving. For Vassanji, home is not just a physical space, but an emotional and psychological state that is shaped by his experiences as a migrant. This study challenges the traditional notion of home as a singular, fixed location and instead presents it as a space that can exist across multiple geographies and time periods. Vassanji's relationship with Kariakoo is symbolic of this fluidity. Although he left East Africa decades ago, Kariakoo continues to occupy a central place in his sense of self. Avtar Brah rightly stated that

"...home' is a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination. In this sense it is a place of no return, even if it is possible to visit the geographical territory that is seen as the place of 'origin'. On the other hand, home is also the lived experience of a locality" (Brah 188-189).

His return to Kariakoo is thus both a homecoming and a departure, as he confronts the dissonance between the place as he remembers it and the place as it exists in the present.

Throughout the memoir, Vassanji struggles with the question of where home truly lies- whether it's home the place of one's birth, or is it the place where one has built a life. For Vassanji, the answer is not straightforward. His diasporic identity means that he inhabits multiple worlds, each of which offers a different version of home. Vassanji said that "the land whose colours and smells most beckoned to him, the land in which his family root went deepest" (*Home was Kariakoo* I). Kariakoo is one of those worlds, but so are Canada, where he has lived for many years, and India, the land of his ancestors. This multiplicity of homes is both a source of richness and dislocation. On one hand, it allows Vassanji to draw on a diverse range of cultural influences and experiences. On the other hand, it complicates his sense of belonging, as he is never fully at home in any one place. This tension is central to the memoir's exploration of home, which is depicted as a space of both comfort and alienation.

While *And Home Was Kariakoo: A Memoir of East Africa*, is a deeply personal memoir, it also engages with broader postcolonial themes related to race, ethnicity, and migration in East Africa. Vassanji's return to Kariakoo is not just a personal journey but a reflection on the changing dynamics of postcolonial East Africa, particularly Tanzania. The memoir highlights how the legacy of colonialism continues to shape the region's political, social, and economic landscape. One of the key postcolonial themes in the memoir is the relationship between the South Asian community and the African majority in Tanzania. During the colonial period, South Asians occupied an intermediary position between the British colonizers and the African population, often serving as traders and middlemen. This position afforded them certain privileges but also made them targets of resentment and suspicion in the post-independence period. Vassanji reflects on these tensions in the memoir, noting how the South Asian community's sense of belonging in East Africa has always been precarious.

At the same time, the memoir critiques the nationalist rhetoric of postcolonial East Africa, which often framed South Asians as outsiders who did not truly belong to the nation. Vassanji's return to Kariakoo is marked by a sense of displacement, as he navigates a postcolonial landscape where the identities and roles of different ethnic groups are constantly shifting. His reflections on the current state of East Africa are tinged with ambivalence, as he recognizes both the achievements of the postcolonial era and the challenges that continue to plague the region.

Conclusion

In *And Home Was Kariakoo: A Memoir of East Africa*, M.G. Vassanji masterfully navigates the complicated land of home memory, weaving a narrative that beats the personal to resonate with the universal. This memoir, rooted in his East African upbringing and shaped by his diasporic journey, serves as a deep reflection on how memory anchors identity amidst the shifting sands of time, place, and history. Through revisiting the physical

landscapes of Dar es Salaam, Zanzibar, and other East African locales, Vassanji not only reclaims a lost childhood but also interrogates the broader socio-historical forces of colonialism, postcolonial upheaval, and migration that have redefined the region and its people. This exploration culminates in a nuanced understanding of 'home' as a fluid, multifaceted concept, one that exists in the interplay of recollection and reinvention.

Vassanji's memoir highlights the duality of memory as both a tether and a liberator. His bright descriptions of Kariakoo's bustling streets or the coastal serenity of Zanzibar evoke a sensory nostalgia that binds him to his origins. Yet, this return is not merely a sentimental exercise; it is a critical reckoning with the transformations that have altered these spaces politically, culturally, and personally. The East Africa he once knew is no longer fully accessible, existing instead in fragments preserved by memory and reshaped by the present. This tension highlights a key finding of the study: home, for Vassanji, is not a fixed destination but a dynamic process of remembrance and reimagination, a dialogue between what was and what remains.

Moreover, the memoir's engagement with collective memory extends its significance beyond the individual. Vassanji's reflections on the East African Indian diaspora, the legacies of colonial rule, and the region's postcolonial identity resonate with broader narratives of displacement and belonging. His personal story becomes a lens through which to view the shared experiences of those uprooted by history, offering a poignant commentary on how communities sustain their sense of self in exile. This intersection of the personal and the communal underscores the memoir's relevance in contemporary discussions of migration and globalization, where the search for home remains a universal human endeavour.

It emerges as a powerful testament to the enduring pull of home memory in shaping identity. Vassanji's work challenges readers to reconsider the boundaries of belonging, suggesting that home is not confined to geography but is carried within, perpetually revisited and redefined through the act of remembering. By blending memoir, travelogue, and historical reflection, he crafts a narrative that is both deeply personal and expansively universal, inviting us to reflect on our own connections to the places we call home. Ultimately, this research study of Vassanji's memoir reveals that revisiting home memory is not merely an act of looking back; it is a creative and transformative process that bridges past and present, self and society, affirming the resilience of the human spirit in the face of change. Through this lens, Vassanji's East Africa becomes a microcosm of the global diasporic experience, a space where memory serves as both anchor and compass. It is both a personal and historical meditation on the meaning of home, offering readers a profound reflection on the complexities of memory, identity, and the experience of being caught between multiple worlds.

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