



## Residential Affiliation In M.G. Vassanji's Novel "No New Land"

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### ARTICLE INFO

### ABSTRACT

The historical context of Indian labourers moving to East Africa due to British colonialism, and their subsequent departure during the decolonization period, is a backdrop to many of Vassanji's novels. This displacement forms a foundation for exploring the themes of belonging and identity within the immigrant experience. The Indian community's relocation from Africa to Canada, as depicted in "No New Land," touches upon the intricacies of their identity crisis. Having been uprooted twice—first from India to Africa, and then from Africa to Canada—these immigrants face unique challenges in defining their sense of home and belonging. The concept of an ethnic enclave is used in the novel to depict this struggle, where the immigrant protagonists choose to live in a predominantly South Asian residential building in Don Mills. An ethnic enclave, like the one in "No New Land," can offer a sense of security and community for immigrants by providing a familiar cultural landscape within an unfamiliar country. However, as the novel illustrates, such enclaves can also lead to what Vassanji terms "residential affliction," a condition where immigrants might feel confined within their cultural community, which could hinder their integration into the wider society. The "Affliction" in the novel and the broader experience of the immigrant community represents the pain and challenges of maintaining one's cultural heritage while facing the pressures of assimilation and acceptance in a new land. Vassanji's depiction of these experiences in his novels invites readers to understand the intricacies of immigrant life, the emotional and cultural dilemmas faced by those who live in ethnic enclaves, and how these factors contribute to the collective ethnic record of the community.

**Key words:** Affiliation, immigrants, residential, ethnic

### Introduction

Indeed, diasporic identities often maintain an emotional connection to their ancestral or "old country," reflecting a sense of belonging to their place of origin even after migration. Avtar Brah, in "Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities," suggests that these connections are complex and multifaceted, referring to the concept of "home" as both a mythic place of origin and a site that might be out of reach for actual return, though it remains an important part of the diasporic person's identity. This indicates that diaspora communities are not monolithic but composite, with diverse experiences, memories, and attachments that shape their sense of self and community in their host countries (Routledge, 1997)

Canada indeed has a unique geographical and historical narrative. As the second-largest country in the world by land area, located in the northern part of North America, it is bordered by three oceans: the Atlantic to the east, the Pacific to the west, and the Arctic Ocean to the north. It also shares the world's longest binational land border with the United States to the south.

Historically, Canada's population is a tapestry of Indigenous peoples, including First Nations, Métis, and Inuit, as well as European settlers who began to arrive in large numbers following the exploration of North America in the late 15th century. Over time, Canada has become a multicultural and diverse nation, reflected in its official policy of multiculturalism first announced in 1971.

The story of Canada is also one marked by the engagement of its Indigenous populations and the impact of European colonization. Over the centuries, the country has grown into a modern nation noted for its diversity and commitment to pluralism.

That passage describes the historical context of how the indigenous groups in Canada lived before European colonization changed their way of life. It mentions how the Europeans, notably the French and English, impacted the land, culture, and languages, eventually leading to Canada becoming a British colony. Later, through negotiation, Canada progressed towards independence and was established as the Dominion of Canada under the North America Act of 1867. This backdrop is likely to set the stage for further discussion on the country's history of immigration, multiculturalism, and its indigenous peoples' struggles during and after colonization.

Your passage highlights the evolution of Canada's political status and its demographic changes, particularly in relation to immigration. Indeed, Canada gained full independence from the United Kingdom with the patriation of its Constitution in 1982, although it had been self-governing under the terms of the North America Act since 1867. The First of July, known as Canada Day, commemorates the union of the three separate colonies of the Province of Canada, Nova Scotia, and New Brunswick into a single Dominion within the British Empire called Canada.

The need for labour after World War II led to significant changes in Canada's immigration policies, resulting in the arrival of numerous immigrants from non-European countries, particularly from South Asia. This immigration influx included a large number of Indian migrants. Their initial migration to East Africa to construct railway tracks and subsequent movements due to colonial and post-colonial circumstances have had a profound effect on the composition of Canada's ethnic landscape, with South Asians becoming one of its largest ethnic minorities. These historical moments are foundational for understanding the current multicultural fabric of Canada, which is celebrated and protected under its multiculturalism policies.

Yes, your summary accurately reflects a period of history involving South Asian immigrants in Africa. After the completion of the railway construction in Africa, many Indian laborers indeed chose to stay and start their own businesses, becoming successful and often occupying managerial roles in colonial and private enterprises, which had complex implications, especially in relation to the local African populations.

The post-independence era in Africa saw a wave of nationalization policies, commonly referred to as "Africanization," where newly independent African states sought to transfer economic control from foreign and minority populations to the African majority. This led to the disenfranchisement and expulsion of many South Asians, who had to leave their lives in Africa behind.

With limited options, and often not welcomed back to a homeland they had left generations before, many of these displaced South Asian individuals and families sought refuge and new opportunities in other parts of the world, including the UK, Canada, and the USA. These migrations contributed to the multicultural demographics of these countries and added complexity to the diasporic experiences of those impacted by these shifts, including the challenges of cultural and religious integration within new communities.

### **Residential affiliation**

In "No New Land," M.G. Vassanji indeed grapples with themes such as racism, identity, and displacement. The narrative revolves around Nurdin Lalani, his wife Zera, and their children, Fatima and Hanif, as they migrate from Tanzania to Toronto. The Lalani family's story showcases the tension between allegiance to their ancestral culture and the need to adapt to a new social and cultural milieu in Canada. The characters demonstrate varying degrees of adherence to their South Asian values and beliefs, with Nurdin struggling particularly to reconcile his background with the demands of his new environment. This tension is a common thread in Vassanji's work, reflecting the broader experience of South Asian Canadians who endeavour to maintain their ethnic identity while contending with the pressures of assimilation. The narrative delves into the emotional and social challenges—referred to as "residential afflictions"—faced by the family as they attempt to build a life in Canada. These afflictions are often portrayed as an intrinsic part of the community's historical record, highlighting how diasporic life is replete with experiences of nostalgia, cultural liminality, and the continuous attempt to retain one's heritage despite the pervasive influence of the dominant culture. Vassanji uses the personal struggles of the Lalani family to examine and illustrate the larger collective experience within the South Asian diaspora in Canada, especially the endeavour to preserve one's identity amidst the multicultural fabric of contemporary Canadian society. The characters' journeys through "liminal spaces" where cultures intersect are a testament to the complex process of negotiating identity and belonging in a land far removed from one's place of origin.

Living in an ethnic enclave is one of the main strategies that is used in fiction to express immigrants' sense of affiliation. As a concept, enclave is identified as "an area of a country or city where the people have a different religion, culture...from those who live in the country or city that surrounds it" (Abbas et al., 2017). For immigrants, settling in an area that is not different to their cultural environment back home gives them a feeling of safety and security. Indeed, enclave occupies a good space in post-colonial literature because it represents a kind of ethnic immigrants' resistance against being integrated into the majority. As a protecting measure, some groups of immigrants seek to isolate themselves in an enclave to decrease the cultural effects of a majority who is different in race and culture (Abbas et al., 2017).

The characters in M.G. Vassanji's "No New Land" indeed experience residential afflictions as they navigate their new life in Canada. By choosing to live in an ethnic enclave like the sixty-nine Rosecliffe building in Don Mills, which houses a significant number of South Asian families, the Lalanis are seeking a sense of community

and familiarity within a foreign land. This choice reflects their desire for cultural cohesion and an environment where they can preserve their traditional values and practices. The decision to live in this enclave allows the Lalani family to maintain their ethnic identity and connect with others who share similar backgrounds and experiences. It also illustrates their initial resistance to assimilation into the mainstream Canadian society, as the enclave provides a buffer against the cultural disorientation that often accompanies immigration. Such enclaves can serve as a support system for newcomers, providing not just the comfort of shared cultural and linguistic references but also helping mitigate the impact of racial discrimination and social isolation that immigrants might face in the broader society. For the Lalanis and other families in Rosecliffe, the enclave is a space where they can negotiate their sense of belonging and confront the realities of their "new land" within a community that mirrors aspects of their homeland.

The adage "you are what you eat" underscores the close connection between food and identity, particularly in the context of immigrant narratives. Food acts as a potent symbol of culture, tradition, and community. It provides immigrants a means to express and preserve their cultural heritage, maintain community ties, and assert their identity in a foreign land.

In literary works like "No New Land," food becomes more than just sustenance; it is laden with the memories of home and becomes a key element in the development of ethnic enclaves. The preparation and consumption of ethnic foods within these communities serve to reinforce cultural bonds and offer comfort amidst the challenges of assimilation and displacement.

Ethnic food can also represent communal solidarity in the face of adversity, acting as a form of cultural resistance against the homogenizing forces of the dominant society. The sharing of traditional cuisines can help maintain a connection to one's roots and can be pivotal in sustaining a collective identity within the enclave.

The significance of food in shaping the enclave experience is multifaceted, as it not only facilitates a sense of belonging and continuity with the past but also can become a focal point for the expression of residential afflictions, capturing the essence of the immigrant struggle to balance integration with the preservation of cultural distinctiveness.

In "No New Land," the character's sense of belonging is reinforced by engaging in familiar cultural practices, such as the preparation and distribution of traditional foods within the ethnic enclave of Sixty-nine Rosecliffe. These activities are not merely about sustenance but also about preserving cultural rituals and fostering community bonds among the immigrants:

- Gulshan Bai's preparation of the "tiffin" represents the continuation of a tradition from her homeland, providing a daily connection to her cultural roots and reinforcing the communal identity through shared meals.
- Sheru Mama's dedication to making and selling "Chappati" serves a similar purpose. By offering a staple food item common to the South Asian diet, he facilitates a sense of normalcy and continuity for the enclave's residents.
- Ram Deen and his daughter's attention to providing "halal beef" caters to the dietary restrictions of their Muslim community members, therefore honouring religious beliefs and practices, which is a crucial aspect of their identity.

These characters' endeavours to meet their community's cultural and dietary needs exemplify the role of ethnic food as a cornerstone for maintaining a connection to their heritage, as well as a means of coping with the residential afflictions of living in a foreign land. The roles they fulfil in Sixty-nine Rosecliffe not only enable them to establish their sense of belonging but also illustrate how such enclaves become self-sustaining microcosms where cultural practices continue to thrive despite the pressures of a new and different external environment.

The practices within the Sixty-nine Rosecliffe enclave, as depicted in "No New Land," serve as powerful examples of how immigrant communities create spaces that allow for the preservation and sharing of their cultural heritage. The commitment of a family on the eighteenth floor to host "An Open House" every Saturday offers an opportunity for people from various ethnic backgrounds to gather, support one another, share news from their countries of origin, and discuss issues pertinent to their community. Such events are instrumental in fostering a sense of solidarity and mutual understanding among residents, reinforcing their ethnic affinity, and offering a platform for communal expression and connection.

Moreover, the presence of babysitters on every floor, entrusted with the responsibility of providing children with an education that honours their ethnic background before they enter mainstream educational institutions, is a testament to the community's deliberate efforts to instil cultural values in the next generation. These children are thus equipped with a strong sense of identity and belonging, rooted in their community's traditions and beliefs.

These examples illustrate how the Sixty-nine Rosecliffe enclave functions not just as a residential space, but as a cultural hub that mirrors the life and culture of the Indian subcontinent. The communal initiatives and cultural practices enable residents to maintain their cultural identity while they navigate the complexities of living in a Canadian setting. It creates a "world" within a world, where the cultural affinity to the subcontinent is celebrated and sustained, highlighting the enclave's vital role as a buffer and bridge for immigrants as they adapt to life in Canada.

## Conclusion

In "No New Land," M.G. Vassanji indeed raises important questions concerning the complexities of immigrant integration and the tension between maintaining ethnic allegiance and assimilating into the host society. The challenges associated with language barriers are a significant aspect of this narrative. Zera's experience as a clinic receptionist, where her poor English communication skills lead to the loss of her job, highlights the practical realities that many immigrants face when they're not proficient in the language of their new country. This proficiency barrier can unfortunately lead to discrimination in employment and exacerbate the challenges of integration.

The ethnic enclave provides a comforting buffer that preserves cultural identity and practices, but it can also act as a cocoon that may inadvertently hamper language acquisition and the ability to interact with the broader society. The enclave experience can thus have a dual effect: it can be empowering in terms of cultural preservation, but it can also isolate its members from the larger community, limiting language development and the opportunity for cultural exchange.

Vassanji's portrayal of this dynamic prompts readers to contemplate the delicate balance immigrants must strike between the need to belong to their ethnic community and the requirement to navigate and integrate into the cultural and linguistic frameworks of their new country. These themes illuminate the broader social discourse about the role of language in cultural adaptation, the barriers that immigrants face, and the complex nature of ethnic identity in the context of diaspora and transnational migration.

The incident involving Nurdin and the young woman in "No New Land" highlights the potential misunderstandings and cultural clashes that can occur when immigrants, who live within ethnic enclaves, interact with the broader society. Nurdin's gesture, which was meant to be comforting, is misinterpreted as a threat, leading to a distressing confrontation that might have legal consequences. This misunderstanding underscores the difficulties immigrants can face when their own cultural norms and expressions differ from those of the host country.

Such scenarios emphasize the importance of cultural literacy and the need for immigrants to not only understand but also adapt to the societal norms of their new country. Conversely, it also calls into question the extent to which the wider society is willing to understand and accommodate the cultural practices of immigrant communities.

This event encapsulates the "residential affliction" immigrants face, which is the struggle to maintain their ethnic identity while adapting to the dominant culture. It suggests that isolation within an enclave may inadvertently contribute to a gap in understanding between immigrants and the society they now live in. It also reflects the complex nature of immigrant experiences, where an individual's actions are intertwined with cultural practices and expectations. This underscores the necessity for a nuanced approach in assessing an immigrant's experience—taking into account the cultural context of their background and the challenges they face in reconciling it with the demands of integration into a new society.

The conclusion of "No New Land" reflects the enduring connection that immigrants feel toward their countries of origin, which is deeply ingrained in their daily lives. The sense of belonging and yearning for their homeland is not merely an emotional state; it is something that influences their behaviours, choices, and cultural practices on a day-to-day basis. This attachment is evident in the ways that the characters in the novel cling to traditional foods, community celebrations, language, religious practices, and the maintenance of social norms from their native lands.

These daily affirmations of their cultural identity within the ethnic enclave serve as a testament to the persistent bond with their countries of origin. It is through these routines and the re-creation of a familiar environment that the immigrants can navigate the complexities of living in a new land. The characters' actions demonstrate a deep desire to retain a sense of self that is closely tied to their cultural roots, even as they confront the realities of their lives in the diaspora. This ongoing attachment can be both a source of comfort and a cause of affliction as they strive to balance the preservation of their heritage with the pressures to integrate into their new society.

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