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## Love for Saida and the Love for the Land: Rereading Magic of Saida

Shweta Singh  
Research Scholar  
Department Of English  
Dr. RML Awadh University, Ayodhya

Dr. V. P. Singh  
Associate Professor  
Department Of English  
KNI, Sultanpur (UP)


### Abstract:

Rich with historical and cultural details, a soft tale of 20th Century Colonialism, *The Magic of Saida* offers the readers the feeling of being drawn into one of M. G. Vassanji's generational epics. Coming back to the theme of the split between different cultures and an inescapable past— something that immigrants can certainly appreciate in any form— M. G. Vassanji weaves the theme in a fresh way. In the novel, we follow the identity trajectory of a successful physician in Edmonton, Canada, who is already experiencing diasporic displacement and returns to his native village by nothing more than an escalating nostalgia and a gathering desire to find his first love, Saida, and to find the answers to harrowing questions. The story is recounted by a chance acquaintance, a discreet narrator whose connection to the events becomes less random as the novel progresses. The intense childhood experience of both inclusion and estrangement from both sides of his family looms large in the story of Kamal Punja, a Tanzanian-born half-breed Indian, who is curiously destined to make history repeat itself. The unconscious, as Freud would say, is an immediate warehouse, the source of stored memory, insight, fantasy, and dreams, but Saida in Kamala's unconscious mind is more like a living being, the love which can never be jettisoned into the unconscious but can't be made public too because of his family and wife. There is nothing particularly likable or altruistic about Kamala Punja. It is his coming-

of-age memories of an other-worldly African girl in Kilwa on the Swahili coast, south of Dar Es Salaam, that makes the story interesting. Though we do not find any firsthand account of Saida's life, it is her floating image that connects the threads of the story throughout. Saida and the magic, both are important factors deeply associated with the African culture and both play a very crucial role in the life of Kamal. The present papers aims at showing how the female body and land are deeply associated in colonial discourse. Female sexuality is not only seen as a metaphor but also a reality in colonial period.

Keywords: *diaspora, postcolonial, body, nation, identity.*

## I



M.G. Vassanji, whose forefathers migrated from India under the indenture system in colonial rule, was born in Nairobi, Kenya in 1950. His family left for Dar es Salaam in Tanzania at the end of the Mau Mau period. The United Republic of Tanzania came into being in 1964. Those were the times of economic setbacks and political unrest in the entire African continent. The indigenous Africans had a very hostile attitude towards Indians whose situation was like a "colonial sandwich", with the European at the top and Africans at the bottom. Amid increasing resentment against the Africans many Indians fled to England, Europe, and North America to avoid racial and political discrimination. Vassanji, at the age of 19, left the University of Nairobi on a scholarship to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. After earning a doctorate in Physics from the University of Pennsylvania and working as a writer-in-residence at the University of Iowa in the International Writing Program, he migrated to Canada and worked at the Chalk River Power Station for some time. Finally, he came to Toronto in 1980 and accepted Canadian Citizenship in 1983. In 1989 his first novel *The Gunny Sack* was published. That year he, with his wife Nurjehan Aziz founded and edited the first issue of *The Toronto South Asian Review (TSAR)*. Apart from *The Gunny Sack* Vassanji has penned seven more novels; *No New Land* (1991), *The Book of Secrets* (1994) (which won the very first Scotiabank Giller Prize), *Amriika* (1999) , *In-Between World of Vikram Lall* (2003) (which also received the Scotiabank Giller Prize), *The Assassin's Song* (2007), *The Magic of Saida* (2012), *Nostalgia* (2016), and *A Delhi Obsession* (2019); two

short story collections *Uhuru Street* (1992) inspired by Naipaul's *Miguel Street*, and *When She Was Queen* (2005); and three non-story works.

Vassanji's works, except *The Assassin's Song* and *A Delhi Obsession*, deal with diasporic Indians living in East Africa and their further migration to other places. This chain of migrations provides him a multicultural background. Monica Colt rightly observes that the author possesses "a multicultural background whose personal story started in Kenya, where he was born. His personal imprint. Correlated with his emotional experience, has certainly influenced his fiction." (2017 4) She further opines that Vassanji's own experience helps him substantially to reshape the experiences of a migrant in a new land:

The author's academic studies in the USA, followed by his decision to make Canada his home, enlarge the author's perspective with the experience of these societies in which the politics of multiculturalism shape the historical multiculturalism. Likewise, the tonality of his works, that of an author formed in the years of Kenya's and Tanzania's independence, is reflected by his attention to the historical detail without taking sides, to the characters' interdependencies and to their role in the reconstruction of the past. (4)

Vassanji is concerned with how these migrations affect the life and identity of such dislocated lives. As a secondary theme, members of his community of Indian Muslims of the esoteric Shamsi sect (like himself) later undergo a second migration to Europe, Canada, or the United States. Vassanji explores the impact of these migrations on these characters, which gives rise to multiple themes of double migration, global uprootedness, ambivalent affiliations of home and origin and the complex interracial and interterritorial sexual relationship. There have been several studies focusing on complex questions of origin and home, the dislocated lives, ruptured identities, collective memory of the community, self-chosen migrancy or enforced wanderings, and untold histories in the novels of M. G. Vassanji. Yet there has been no sustained analysis of his novels from the perspective of the gendered power relationship between the African natives and Indians, who arrived here as indentured labours, but in due time, they flourished and gained a higher status than the natives. Indians, like their white masters, enjoyed all the privileges of African slavery. They could keep African women as slaves and would use their bodies as a conquered land. By using female characters as an

allegory for Africa, Vassanji panders to traditional colonial discourses that view the land as a feminine entity to be penetrated and conquered. This colonial discourse of body as conquered land is quite explicit in four novels of Vassanji, *The Gunny Sack*, *The Book of Secrets*, *In-Between World of Vikram Lall*, and *The Magic of Saida*.

## II

*The Magic of Saida* is set in Tanzania, East Africa. The protagonist of the novel, Kamal Punja, was born in Kilwa in East Africa, a town ‘whose recorded history and culture go back a thousand years and more.’ This fictive resident of Western Canada’s northernmost metropolis Edmonton is at the centre of a family saga with ties to India and intriguing tales of love, magic, memory, and history of colonial legacies. Aggrawal rightly sums up that the novel

tries to claim the truth about the neglected history and a negative cultural identity of East-African Asians during the turbulent times of colonialism and independence in the erstwhile territories of German and British East Africa. The novel extensively deals with the issue of African Nationalism during the pre-independence era and its aftermath. The strict German rule and the sufferings of the half-breeds (African-Asians) as well as the native Africans form the major content of the novel. (2017 135)

The story of a half breed Indian, whose black blood dominates his emotion and love for Africa and his African beloved who is haunted by the memory of the beloved and the beloved country, the novel offers the mediated perspective of the third person narrative intermingling the past and the present through the voice of Martin Kigoma, “an African publisher” who is seeking stories “from Oyster Bay to Kariakoo” (Vassanji 2012 2). In unraveling the mystery of what made Kamal so sick, Kigoma appears fascinated by the intriguing story of Kamal, the model of success in Canada for an Indian East African, who has a triple layer of identity; an African appearance, but an Indian name and more surprisingly a Canadian dwelling place (4); a further set of layers is of an emigrated doctor who is the co-owner of three successful clinics, a husband, and father of two talented children. Kigoma’s narration unfolds Kamal Punja’s life story as told from his hospital bed in Tanzania, where Kamal lies delusional and near death. Beginning a long time before, in the African city of

Kilwa, the story is outlined against a magic space as the first question Kamal asks Martin in “his sickbed” (4) is: “Do you believe in magic?” (4). Kamal is a descendent of Punja Devraj. He was a Gujarati from India who had come to Zanzibar as a trader. But Kamal is often called *chotara*, *golo*, a half breed or “servant or slave” (195), because of his African mother of slave ancestry. Kamal is raised by her in the absence of his father, who used her body and fled leaving the mother and the son behind. Her exploitation is symbolic of a nation being exploited by foreign traders. Kamal’s Indian father left his mother to go back to India after enjoying her body till he remained in Africa. Eventually at the age of eleven Kamal is adopted by his paternal uncle who then raises him, with all discrimination, in Dar es Salaam, according to Indian tradition. Kamal has to pay a big prize to ‘become an Indian,’ as he has to desert Saida, his friend and childhood love. Saida Kulthum is the granddaughter of a famous Swahili poet Omari bin Tamim. The poet is rumored to be aided by a djinn in his writing. However, his involvement with German colonizers is a matter of debate. This involvement along with his suicide is also at the center of the mystery in the novel. Saida is a beautiful girl with certain somewhat mystical powers. Kamal is her tutor and she teaches Kamal Arabic while he instructs her in arithmetic and English. Both of them form a strong bonding; an everlasting love. This love becomes intense and eventually culminates into an illicit physical relationship between them. She gives birth to a child, which her husband suspects that it was not his child. She comes to Kamal’s place to enquire about him, but she is sent away empty-handed. This incident that she gave birth to his child and once she had come to Kamal’s uncle’s place to inquire about him, is known by Kamal accidentally after a long time and then he decides to return (leaving behind a flourishing career as a doctor and a family) Africa in search of Saida. In this way, the story of the search for Saida connects to the narrative.

As the plot progresses, Kamal goes to Uganda with the financial help of his uncle for further studies and is seen as a promising young talent, but when Idi Amin, after a successful Mau Mau uprising, seizes power and expels all the Asians, Kamal, with his friend and would-be wife Shamim, flees to Canada. His fortune smiles on him and he flourishes as a medical practitioner. His family life too is going well. But the past keeps beckoning him. Though Kamal has never left his African identity yet has never recovered from his

sense of abandonment. Even being a half-caste, he silently supported Idi Amin, because he always considered himself an African. Vassanji describes the condition of Kamal thus:

It was the Golo in him who sent up the partial cheer for Idi Amin. It was the half-caste who had identified with the house servants (“boys”), flinched at their abuse and humiliations, and suffered his own share of them in school. It was the boy who had cried for his African mother and his special friend in Kilwa. (261)

But when he is faced with the brutal reality of Amin’s government at the refugee camps, he feels guilty for having silently cheered for Idi Amin. He calls his blunder “a half cheer from a half-caste” (263). In fact, he is aware that Indians too have been exploiting the Africans. He can do nothing, but his anger knows no bounds when he discovers his Indian Uncle’s sexual escapades with an African woman: “He recalled his horror and shame when he saw a young African woman coming out of his uncle’s back room. He had been reminded of his mother—and wept at night because he was nothing but a half-caste bastard.” (261) He feels sorry for the African girl and obviously starts comparing the relationship of his mother and father with the relationship of this girl with his uncle and a feeling of doubt about his father’s loyalty to his mother overpowers him. He wonders whether such was the nature of the relationship between his father and mother, whether she was not more than a sex object for him. Though don’t find any female voice, this is how their concern is raised and Vassanji keeps raising such questions about African female and the nation; both are exploited by outsiders.

Kamal's African identity hurts him even in his married life in Edmonton and often creates an obstacle to his adjustment to his family. His wife comments: "How could you allow yourself to be called a slave, where is your pride." (195) The patriarchal mindset of people never allows him to be called an African; the son of an African mother becomes anathema to his identity. How sex is determining or rather becomes an obstacle in defining real identity is evident in the case of An African mother-born son. Thus he decides to come back after thirty-five years to his homeland. Kamal is haunted by the memory of her beloved and the culture of his native land. They call him back to face what he has long tried to ignore. Inside this return, we see the cultural complexity of someone of Indian-African descent navigating three different worlds, African, Indian, and Canadian. He breaks up his marriage, leaves his grown-up children behind, and he decides to return to Tanzania to look for



Saida—to fulfill the promise he had made to her many years before. But this returning to one's own land is not as easy as he feels trapped in many in-between situations. Past haunts him and he visits Zanzibar in search of his ancestral history but fails to find her mother. The question of the past always pesters him and is always present with him: “Do we owe anything to the past? A silly question-the past is over-or a profound one-we are part of a continuum.” (Vassanji 2012 31) He still remembers the most painful situation of his life; his separation from his mother whom he loves so much, but for his future she orders him to go Dar to his paternal family. Leaving her behind meant an end to everything that was maternal in his life. Virtually he was orphaned except for a brief period of time when he was assisted by his uncle to complete his studies.

As Kamal gets closer to uncovering Saida's whereabouts, he realizes that his childhood friend may be more than she seems. Saida's magic is the magic of Tanzania itself: a potent substance that makes one believe its blessed water can dissolve bullets. Kamal's relative Fatuma provides Saida's address and he is prompted to visit the village Minazi Minnie, which seems to be a mystery as well as a terrible place as the bus driver and conductor are worried about him when they come to know where he is going. This village hadn't yet seen the light of development. Here he meets Zara on the way who brings him to a hut where he expects to find Saida. But the entire atmosphere for him becomes very shocking when he observes an old woman of small figure, Bibi Ramzani, who fills him with fear:

Icy fingers gripped me. A gust of air, perhaps. That tingle at the back. What you feel in that second before your first high dive ... or, more appropriately, when you say, What the heck, and walk past a baobab tree at dusk, knowing that spirits live there. What was headed for? I should have heeded the signs. In that moment they call back to me. Saida's— or was it Fatuma's?— injunction not to go; the strange silence of the waiter at the hotel; the amused, look on the conductor's face when I told him my destination, and his later show of concern; and the giveaway—the bus driver refusing to stop at the top of the hill, where the path led inside. (291-92)

The old woman asks him the purpose of his visit and his relation to Saida. She asks him to remove the tawiz. The tawiz, which he was wearing around his neck, was given by Saida in his childhood. He denies removing it. Then she insists him to drink Uji, a traditional African porridge, but here a mysterious drink made by African magicians. Due to this drink, he loses his consciousness. When he wakes up, he is sweating. To his surprise, he sees Saida of his childhood who makes complaints about his being unfaithful in love as he had left Saida pregnant. She accuses him of telling lies. She complains, "You went away making promises after I opened myself to you, and you married to an Indian girl. Je, Kamalu, did she give you much happiness? And how many children did she give you? Did you use her as you used me by the shore ..." (295) Kamal didn't expect this torture by Saida. He pleads and confesses that he could never forget her. "Do you know you haunted my life, Malaika?" (296). Then he requests her to tell him every detail of her meeting with her uncle and the rest of her life. She tells that she has gone to Dar with their son in search of Kamal, but his uncle did not tell her about him and commented, "He is an Indian and you are an African." (297)

Saida tells all the details of the plot of the murder of their infant son. She informs that had gone mad after her mother gave her some medicine. Hearing this account of the suffering of her beloved, Kamal screamed and screamed in hallucination.

The entire episode proves to be the most painful part of his life as he realizes that he is dying. He understands that he is to be sacrificed because Saida's husband Mzee Abdalla owes revenge to him and in this village of magicians, there are his followers. Kamal listens to the voices discussing him that Bibi Ramzani is not agreeing to go further with "the rite" of sacrifice. A man's voice replies harshly:

The water is spilled, there is no going back! Long ago we made a pact with Mzee Abdalla. When the father of the child returns, he told us, ill omen is sure to follow, unless we take measures. We must spill his blood right here, and cut of his tongue. His parts shall empower us and his penis shall sheath my knife. (299)



When he comes to sense he is again given Uji, which makes him unconscious. The people want to sacrifice him without any resistance. Zara, the young woman, comes to his rescue. Her excuse was that it was a night of Laylatu Kadir in the month of Ramadan, therefore such dreadful acts should be postponed. *Laylatul Qadr*, the Night of Decree or Night of Power, is one of the most sacred nights in the Islamic calendar. It takes place in the last ten days of Ramadan and was the night in which the Qur'an was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). (See "The spiritual significance of the last ten nights of Ramadan"). Anyhow they agree and he is left for another night. When he awakes he finds that someone had cut his ropes. Dr. Engineer and Lateef take him back. Back in Dar, he ponders over whether that horror in the village was real and had "he seen Saida, or was she conjured up for him with drugs? What was the truth in that experience?" (302) He verifies every detail of the coming of Saida to his Uncle's home from a letter to his cousin Yasmin. In this letter, he describes his recent experience that it was revealed to him in his drugged state in that dark hut in Minazi Minne. She phones him and confirms every detail then he goes to Fatuma. She is no more; therefore he talks to Amina, her daughter-in-law. To his surprise, she knew everything and has never told him. He chides her that he tried so much to know but she never told him anything. Then he visits Minazi Minne again, now this time by car. He finds Zara who informs him that the old woman died the day after he fled from the village. Kamal instantly recognizes the blue sandals and the dress that Zara has put on. These things were gifted to Saida by Kamal. Zara informs that she found these things in the hut of that old woman. She further informs him that "She called herself Kinjikitile". (305) This was the name which he used to call her with love. Kamal is stunned to find out that Bibi Ramzani was Saida. The found and the lost Saida make him again desolate.

### III

Though it seems that Vassanji favours a masculine dimension in this novel as the novel primarily explores Kamal's identity definition, his definition of identity is incomplete without the women's agency of African dissidents. The process of exploring Kamal's identity is also a process of mediation to reveal the feminine characters in the novel. They are beholders of African culture and Kamal, coming back to his roots, his

ancestry and cultural heritage, stays loyal to the land its ladies, unlike his father and uncle. He feels the magic of Arica from the inside through Saida. What he has thought to be a treasure hunt before his return, for which he gathers a lot of information through various sources, turns to be a turning point in his life that changes his perception beyond his imagination. It is about his realization of absolute love for Africa too, the realization of his deep emotional attachment with his African community, and at the same time betrayal of his mother and the unresolved mystery of his father.

Embedded in this story are Tanzania's political history and its impact on the personal histories of Kamal and Saida. This political history of Tanzania is intricately woven with it the Canadian multicultural context with its “rise and fall” in the accommodation of diversity (Kymlicka 32), which underlines the role of values that occur on a number of levels: ethic, social, historical, and political.

Nevertheless, this novel is, at its heart, a subtle and strong exploration of guilt and the potential for redemption in human life. There are various characters in this novel who come to confront such guilt and who handle it in different ways. Along with it, there is a great deal of material presented on the resistance of local people to European colonization -- various rebellions by different regions and the remarkable Maji-Maji war that convulsed much of southern Tanzania against the Germans. The intermingling of Africans and Indians in carrying forward this resistance is also highlighted. So are the tensions amongst races that develop during the twentieth century.

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