
Reading M.G. Vassanji's *the in-between world of Vikram Lal* as an allegory of the nation

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Abstract: This paper will explore the use of allegory as a trope in the writing of East African Asian writer, M.G. Vassanji. We shall apply Fredric Jameson's *Allegory of the Nation* in order to tease out the various ways in which the inner universe of the Kenyan nation is contested and constructed as well as the various enunciations of meanings that generate/are generated and their implications.

Keywords: Nation, Nationhood, Identity

1. Introduction

This paper, intends to demonstrate that the reading of Vassanji's text *The In-between World of Vikram Lal*, presents Kenya as a nation that is constitutive of several aspect among them: That the nation as brought out in the text, is a political entity of polyethnic communities. Kenya as a colonial nation constituted native tribes and was colonized by the British (1800-1963) and the Asians were brought in to work as indentured labourers during the construction of the Kenya- Uganda Railway(17) and at the end of their indenture ship, they settled in Kenya with their only claim to the Kenyan nation being the construction of the railway line. Africans in Kenya took its identity as a vehicle for resistance to colonial oppression as exemplified by the Nandi Resistance (1890-1906), the Mau Mau war for independence among other agitations. Secondly, we identify Kenya as a cultural entity based on language and shared history as captured in the way the Maasai, Luo and Kikuyu dances are performed outside Juma Molabux's home in Nakuru under the watchful eye of both the Asians and the British (57). Thirdly, the Kenyan identity is shaped by symptomatic marginalization at social, political and economic levels as seen in the (mis) treatment of the once freedom fighters who were promised compensation as soon as Kenya would become independent.

2. The Allegory of the Nation

To speak of Kenya as a Nation is to imply the traditional view of the common trope that has been held over time by writer's disillusionment with national liberation movements they(writers) have contested the nation's boundaries by highlighting the fluidity of national boundaries hence, nullifying the essentialist definition of the nation itself. But Vassanji in his text celebrates the various strands of 'Kenyaness' inherent in the Kenyan nation by attempting to erase and even redraw the contours of the nation that is all encompassing to other identities beyond the obvious racialized groups of Africans, Asians and Europeans. In so doing, Vassanji recasts the definition of the nation as an unstable entity and projects it (nation) as a collectivity with extant forms of national identification.

Although the text is unproblematically a "national allegory" in Jameson's sense of the term, it demonstrates how the 'problematic' of the nation can figure prominently in its effort to consciously reject any over-simplification on the national discourses and identities. Vassanji, in our view, speaks to the fact that the nation is tied together by 'fragments' who, no matter how disenfranchised by political, social and economic challenges, men and women feel tied together to their homeland and try to overcome the bleakness that tries to fray the already extant fragments.

Critics have defined the nation differently: Pades (1994), conceives of the nation not so much as a physical entity but rather, as a construct of the mind that is in the

process of mapping and re-mapping itself: indeed as something whose shape or shapelessness can be manipulated. Nurddin Farah (1995), defines the nation as "...nothing more than a working hypothesis, portals opening on assumption of allegiance to an idea..." Whereas Ngugi (142-48), uses his ethnic language to challenge and to capture the instability of the foundation of defining a nation.

In Vassanji's text, characters are endowed with disparate qualities that celebrate and transcend national boundaries and in effect, question what constitutes nationality. This invites us into a deeper interpretation of the nation as a "contested referent" (Esonwanne), a "shifting referent" (Cobhan), "imagined communities" (Anderson) or as a "contested construct" (Yewah).

In this paper, we shall demonstrate that Kenya as a nation is constitutive of several aspects among them: That the nation as brought out in the text, is a political entity of polyethnic communities. Kenya as a colonial nation constituted native tribes and was colonized by the British (1800-1963) and the Asians were brought in to work as indentured labourers during the construction of the Kenya-Uganda Railway (17) and at the end of their indentureship, they settled in Kenya with their only claim to the Kenyan nation being the construction of the railway line "The railway running from Mombasa to Kampala, proud "Permanent Way" of the British and "Gateway to the African Jewel," was our claim to the land" (16). There is a sense in which the native Africans in Kenya took its identity as a vehicle for resistance to colonial oppression as exemplified by the Nandi Resistance (1890-1906), the Mau Mau war for independence among other agitations. Secondly, we identify Kenya as a cultural entity based on language and shared history as captured in the way the Maasai, Luo and Kikuyu dances are performed outside Juma Molabux's home in Nakuru under the watchful eye of both the Asians and the British (57). Thirdly, the Kenyan identity is shaped by symptomatic marginalization at social, political and economic levels as seen in the (mis) treatment of the once freedom fighters who were promised compensation as soon as Kenya would become independent. "There was grudging respect but not much sympathy for Mau Mau [from the government] who sought compensation and recognition as heroes of the nation; this was a time of reconciliation and progress..." (my emphasis).

To return to the allegory as prompted by Jameson's assertion that "Third World" texts are "national allegories," distorts the historiography that is attempted by this text rather, we read Vassanji's text as presenting a more realistic view of Kenya during and after independence. The narrative traverses the boundaries between countries, taking us to India where we are introduced to the source/origin of the historical presence of Asians in Kenya (16-17), the division of India into two countries: Pakistan and India (209), the construction of the railway that eased the administration of the British in the East African Colony (15). We are also introduced to the tensions that exist among and between different communities in Kenya both before and after Independence. For instance

there is a lot of stereotyping of the Maasai as a dirty community but it's ironical that Juma Molabux an Asian marries from such a community.

"We used to laugh at the Maasai as kids. We thought of them as dark exotic savages left behind in the Stone Age, with their spears and gourds and half-naked bodies; when one saw them in the street they were to be avoided, for they smelled so. There was a belief among Indian traders that the Maasai could not count;... And it was not only the Indians who disparaged the Maasai. Country bus drivers were known not to stop for them, or when they did, to move all the other passengers up front so these red warriors with their odour could sit at the back" (58-9).

It is from such histories and cultures that we map out the parameters of individual and national identities that can only be possible to construct reality and stress the representation of Kenya as constitutive of fragmented identities. Of import, is the way in which Vassanji presents a multi-layered narrative that embodies the various political tensions, anxieties that although they seem to threaten the fragile strands that hold the national identities, these concerns find expression in collective struggle for existence.

The story of the relationship between Vic, Njoroge and Bill mirrors the movement of conflict itself. Although they seem to enjoy a peaceful and friendly childhood as seen in their role-playing the game of the war of the Hindu gods and the devil, it is good that triumphs over evil (81). At first sight, this role-play seems to replicate the racial trope of nationalism that tends to delimit the British to iconic roles but at a deeper level, there is a conflict and dissent brewing through their younger years which finally explodes when Bill and his entire family is wiped out by the Mau Mau (132-33). It is ironical that it is Kihika, who had worked as a servant in the Bruce's household that kills them using Mr. Lall's gun that had been gifted to the Mau Mau by Mahesh who though Indian, was a sympathizer of the Mau Mau's cause for liberation. In the Mau Mau, Mahesh finds a wistful fulfillment of his own revenge on the British who were responsible for their displacement from Peshawar following the division of India into India and Pakistan. He does not want to witness a repeat of such divide-and-rule tactics being employed in Kenya pitting Africans against Asians, or Africans against themselves. Mahesh alongside Njoroge and Vic, who have taken the Mau Mau oath (92,93), symbolize the depth and breadth of the Mau Mau struggle for liberation and this is an indication of the involvement of all generations in ensuring that their dream of independence in Kenya is attained. But nowhere is this desire for a liberal Kenya more enacted than in the relationship –temptuous passion– between Njoroge and Deepa (171).

3. Genred as a Marker of Nationhood

Deepa in many ways foregrounds the way women have been ossified and abstracted in national discourses. Deepa's appeal is based on disparate factors—as a legal citizen of Kenya, who dresses, loves and interacts liberally, she is immensely appealing to her fellow Asians both in Kenya

and Tanzania who still feel limited by tradition “Deepa, of course, already had several admirers in Parklands, two of whom were rather faithful, accompanying her home from school”(162). Deepa is also involved in a love relationship with Njoroge, a grand so of their former servant and a childhood playmate. For Njoroge, Deepa's bourgeois status and race do not threaten him and it becomes clear that her national figuration is predicated on her gender. Her abstracted identity is further complicated by her parent's fear that Deepa could end up marrying Njoroge (163). In a way, she is presented as a marker of national difference which is in agreement with what Nina Yuval-Davis and Floya Anthias(1989) have noted, that “women's roles as biological producers of the national collectives often render them guardians of cultural boundaries and symbolic markers of national difference.” In this context, Deepa is symbolized as a nation(Asian) instead of being figured as a national player or as an equal citizen.

The fact that Deepa is presented as ‘un-equal’ player in forming the Kenyan citizenry, is an explicit pointer that Kenya is not yet independent for the women folk. This lack of independence is most clearly seen in Deepa's uneven relationship with her father and Dillip her potential husband. Neither of them is able to understand or help Deepa because each is busy fashioning her as their idealized image of the nation with the result that each ends up presenting their own understanding of what they desire from her, but fail to acknowledge Deepa as an individual with her own needs. In this fashion, the text recapitulates Anne McClintock's(1995) truism: “All too often in male nationalisms, gender difference between women and men serves to symbolically define the limits of national difference and power between men”(354). Quite significantly, each man's reaction to Deepa's so called “dishonor”(because she is in love with an African) does more to delineate the disparity of their(Asians) national affiliations than any explicit national discussions among the Asians do.

Deepa's relationship with Njoroge after independence is coincidental with their maturity as well as their first sexual encounter. Though this relationship is fully romantic, it is symbolic of the dream of the young generation of both races that the new nation will be free from oppression and segregation and that their freedom to express their feelings shall go unhindered.

She rushed forward to embrace him, and held on to his hands and gaped at him, smiling, laughing, and tugging at his arms, back and forth and sideways, as if to make sure he was real. Everyone at the chic Rendezvous had looked up at this wild, unorthodox Asian girl, at the joyous embrace and its aftermath. Independence was here, yes, and Kenyatta our leader had forgiven the sins of the past and we were all the citizens of a new multiracial, democratic nation, but still, this was taking integration too fast, too far even for Nairobi!(144)

This connection between Njoroge and Deepa is problematically predicated on independence and may allow Deepa to experience some complete physical contact and ecstasy with Njoroge for the first time, but owing to racial

politics, their relationship can only be tenuous based on proximity and historical contingency(222). Deepa's belief that she can settle down with Njoroge and begin a family is thus untenable and this is in tandem with the abortive national dream of nation building. This is demonstrated by the corrupt political machinations between Asians and Africans yet, her ‘private’ refusal to heed her parents advice that she marries Dillip who is of Asian origin at the expense of Njoroge, demonstrates Deniz Kandiyoti's(1994) contention that “discourses valorizing the ‘private’ as a site of resistance against repressive states ,or as the ultimate repository of cultural identity, should not let us overlook the fact that, in most instances, the integrity of the so-called ‘private’ is predicated upon the unfettered operations of patriarchy”(388).

Deepa uses her education and knowledge of the world to break down the barriers of nationalism as constructed by a male-dominated society around her in an attempt to transcend the boundaries of race. She tells Njoroge:

How can you say that! Came her reply to him. How can you have doubts! If you stop loving me I will die! Let's run away to London, she pleaded, that's what Indian girls do to marry outside their community or religion(193).

She further takes Njoroge to pay tribute to Hindu gods in the temple and finds no problem in attending Mass at a Catholic church. In the context of the above quotation, we read the female body (Deepa) as a site of inscription for pain of national subjugation and post-independence racist oppression. This resistance to oppression is also manifested in Vic, Deepa's brother but since he is male, his resistance is easily mellowed.

Vic's story of corruption that is inherent in Kenya at independence, replicates the story of every Kenyan. Vic becomes the bait that is used by the new African power brokers to pilfer the very resources they fought to secure.

He said softly: these are donations to our party from well-wishers abroad...But they are honest-to-God donations from private individuals. I would like you to find your Indian contacts and have them change this money and stash it; like in a bank. You with your brilliant mind will keep track of the account. And when our different constituencies need money for their operations, they will be paid by those Indians. Umefahamu? You understand?(257).

Vic's story maps itself in the civic cognition and stretches Vic's conscience putting to test his integrity. His private thoughts and actions resonate with Jamesonian notion of “national allegory,” where “the story of the private individual destiny is always the allegory of the embattled situation of the public Third-World culture and society(Jameson,1986:69).” There is a sense in which Paul Nderi replicates the neocolonial attitude in his dealings as a government officer and this distorts the true spirit of nationhood that Kenya is yearning for. In fact, Nderi has introduced a copy of the colonialists own tradition. In a sense, Vassaji uses the figures of Vic and Nderi to explore and represent the fate of the nation as captured in the hegemonic identities of corrupt leaders who wish to drag

fellow citizens into their sway and in effect, underscore the actual lack of social cohesion as captured in the dialogue between Vic and his father.

We met in a coffee shop below his office. There I took him into my confidence. He was mortified.

Baap re, you are not meant for this kind of shady business, this looks dangerous, son.

What can I do, Papa?

You can quit your job-but later, in the future.

Now you have this attaché case, and you have to get rid of it (257).

This dialogue underscores the allegorical division and rivalry between the competing interests in a young nation that are symptomatic of national incoherence. Vic finally manages to escape to Canada after deluding himself in corruption and from such a safe haven, he can only keep a memory reliving of what Kenya as a nation means to him.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, we have demonstrated the allegorical nature of Kenya as a nation by exploring the various perspectives of national identifications which do not rely so much on the geo-political contests of sovereignty but on the various persuasions of individual characters whose narratives are reflective of the diverse yet conglomerate understanding of Kenya as a nation.

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