

M.G. Vassanji's The Book of Secrets: A Postmodern Study

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Abstract

Vassanji is double the champ of the Giller Prize for his novel, The Book of Secrets in the year 1994. History plays a major role in the novel. Discovering the facts is not an easy thing. He portrays how history is to be presented or reproduced through the characters' personalities. The novel consists of letters, journals, diary. Stream of consciousness is the narrative technique used in this novel. Quest of identity is one of the main themes. The first person narrated the whole story. Superstitious beliefs prevail in the shamsi community people is described. Postmodernism plays a major role in the novel. The elements of postmodernism such as Minimalism, Maximalism, Magic Realism, fragmentation, Pastiche, Skepticism were found in the novel. This present paper is an attempt to explore the postmodern elements in M.G. Vassanji's The Book of Secrets.

Key words: *Postmodernism, Intertextuality, Magic Realism, Pastiche, Minimalism*

I. Introduction

Moyez G. Vassanji was born in Nairobi, Kenya in the year 1950 and brought up in Dar esSalaam, Tanzania. He acquired Ph.D. in Nuclear Physics from the University of Pennsylvania. Brought up in Kenya and Tanzania, Vassanji came to America for writing and living. A few years after the fact, he went to Canada. His enthusiasm for Literary began in 1977. His characters in his novel uncovered his own way of life. He lives in Toronto, and visits East Africa and India regularly. He worked at the Chalk River nuclear force station and afterward moved to Toronto in 1980. Vassanji began writing full-time and ended his career in physics.

In an interview with Chelva Kanaganayakam, Vassanji said this of his decision to leave the field of physics: It is the kind of thing you can keep on doing. I had reached a point when I could just churn out things. Unless you are at MIT or Harvard, or a place like that, you are not really at the forefront. Sometimes I miss that life because of the way of thinking it demands. My writing, however, is much more important. It seems to be the mission in life that I finally achieved. (Kanaganayakam, Chelva. "Broadening the Substrata": An Interview with M.G. Vassanji." *World Literature Written in English*. 31, 2 (1991): 19-35.)

Nurjehan Aziz, his better half and he began the Toronto South Asian Review, in 1981, which proceeds with today as Toronto Review of Contemporary Writing Abroad. His works has been converted into many languages. Each works of Vassanji, awakens the interests of the readers. His works deals with Indians living in East Africa. He concerned with the migrants and how the migrations affect their lives and the loss of identities.

In *Mythical Homes and Violent Realities; Reading Gujarat in M.G.Vassanji's A Place Within: Rediscovering India*, Asma argues that as Vassanji, a diasporic traveler removed from his original homeland by many generations and geographies, searches for his roots seeking affirmation of his mythical memory, as he tries to come to terms with the differences between the imagined and the real Gujarat, he represents the angst of the diasporic subject. (Sayed, Asma. *Mythical Homes and Violent Realities; Reading Gujarat in M.G.Vassanji's A Place Within: Rediscovering India* (A Sayed – South Asian Review, 2015 – Taylor and Francis)

The Book of Secrets is about the missing diary of Corbin which was stolen by Mariamu. The diary consists of the story of Corbin and his experience in the village Kikono working as an Assistant District Commissioner. After the death of Mariamu, her husband, Pipa finds the diary and thinks that the diary must have the secret of Ali's birth because Ali has been born with fair skin and grey eyes and the relationship between Corbin and Mariamu. Pipa is illiterate and he is unable to read its secrets. Pipa left Ali with his grandparents in Moshi and marries a woman named Remti. After the death of the grandfather, their family lives in poverty. When Corbin visits Kikono, he comes to know about Mariamu's son and his sufferings so he wishes to help him but Ali's grandmother, Khanoum refuses.

Pipa lives with his two daughters and he calls his son to live with them. Khanoum sends back Ali to his father. The thoughts of Mariamu haunt Pipa daily so he builds a private shrine for his wife, Mariamu within his shop and he keeps Corbin's diary there. From his son, Pipa learns somewhat to read and write. He often tries to speak with the spirit of Mariamu and questions about the birth of Ali but he never gets the answer. Then the novel shifts to the present, where the readers were Pius Fernandes were introduced and he gets the diary of Corbin and reads. After reading as he is a history teacher, he wants to recreate the history. So, he collects evidence from Ali and his student, Rita. They both were very helpful to Pius recreate history. The inconsistency among Pius and Rita is clarified well. She also instructs him that not to focus on one's memory but also all the characters so the readers can understand

In this novel, Vassanji portrays how the history to be recreated and how history is to be introduced through his characters in the novel. Recreating history is not a simple task. Pius is a history teacher; however, he turns into the narrator. His historiographical venture starts with the diary of Corbin. He utilizes the request to arrange Corbin's diary. Pius attempts to recreate the historical backdrop of 75 years of age provincial history of East Africa, with the assistance of the journal. Even before I began to pore over Corbin's entries which would subsequently so grip me, I could not help but feel that in some mysterious manner the book touched our lives; was our book. There was, I felt, much more there than the contents of its pages; there was the story of the book itself. (7)

World war is also noted in this novel. He portrays the battle of Shamsi people group, outsiders from India, caught in British-German fringe and furthermore the disarray of Pius Fernandes and quest for personality. While reading the novel, Pius finds the diary ends incompletely. The novel portrays the functions from 1 March, 1913 to 24 July, 1914. The diary ends four months before the war. So, his curiosity makes him to wish to connect the past to the present. The novel consists of journal, letters, past experiences, citations and so on. The story is in the form of first-person narration. Vassanji pictures the Shamsi community people and their culture and how they treat the outsiders, their mannerisms, their food, their festivals and celebrations are also detailed. The story begins in East Africa at the hour of World War I, in which German Tanganyika and British Kenya are

going to war and the story extends into present. The tale sets in Africa and spots like Voi, urban communities of Mombasa, Kikono and Nairobi in Kenya, Moshi, Taveta, Tanga, Dar es Salaam and Zanzibar in Tanzania are where the activity happens.

The author uses some supernatural elements to makes enthusiasm to the readers. At first in the novel, when Corbin is appointed as ADC, he fell in love with Mariamu and saves her from some sort of exorcism made by her own family. Pipa kept the diary in his store room and often talks with the spirit of Mariamu and she also talks to him. She says that she came only for his son and Pipa asks to tell the truth in the mystery of Ali's birth but every time he asks, she vanishes herself.

Modernism is the stepping stone for postmodernism and it is both a philosophical and art development that emerged in late nineteenth century and mid twentieth hundreds of years from the changes in Western culture. Modernism can be portrayed by a self-conscious break with traditional styles of verse and poetry. Postmodernism is 'post' since it is keeping the presence from getting any extreme standards, and it comes up short on the good faith of there being a logical, philosophical or strict truth which will clarify everything for everyone – an attribute of the supposed present-day mind.

Postmodernism signifies after the modern period. Postmodernism is difficult to characterize yet initially a response to modernism. Postmodern conveys that, everybody has their own fact, or truth is the thing that you make it and that it is to a great extent difficult to get reality. Postmodern works are viewed as a response against Enlightenment thinking and Modernist ways to deal with writing. Regularly postmodern writing spoofs the cutting edge one. In postmodernism, thoughts are social develops which finishing pressure bunches use to persecute each other and force their control more than each other. Postmodernism is a belief system. It is a late twentieth century summed up thought or reflection in expressions of the human experience, design and analysis which speaks to a development away from modernism.

Postmodernism recommends that nothing is genuine, nothing is unbelievable. A thing may either bogus or genuine nobody knows, it up to the individual mind-set and the method of discovering things in genuine sense. Postmodernism is doubtful of fantastic theories and accounts. On account of History, is regarded by numerous postmodern authors as a story developed for specific purposes, which are not blameless. Each chronicled account includes a cycle of determination, altering, and translation with respect to the creator, and consequently can be objective. Postmodern scholars regularly recoup overlooked accounts of underestimated individuals.

Postmodernist believe their ideas are symbol of creativity and can guide us for the creative student. The postmodernist always led others to think critically, develop the individual self-identity. The readers try to think in different way. The main aim is to change our prospection of reality, both on the physical and temporal level. Postmodernism takes effort to the readers to find the reality.

Postmodern literature comprises of Intertextuality, Meta Fiction, Realism, Pastiche, Maximalism, Minimalism, Hyperreality, Fragmentation, Irony, Playfulness, Dark Humor, Fabulation, Techno culture and so on. Postmodern literature reveals the chaos of an incoherent world, as we find in this novel are discussed below.

In the novel, *The Book of Secrets*, the character named Pipa simply possesses the postmodern identity where his way of living is simply a quiet astonishing fact where he takes all the life decisions according to his

own will whether it is true to his conscience or not. He never bothers about the traditional way of living as he molds all the ideas with uniqueness in his character. At first, he marries Mariamu and when she dies, the old school concept of love simply breaks down although he has a son named Aku from his wife Mariamu. He marries a girl named Remti as he simply breaks the old tradition of love where one person is meant for one.

Intertextuality is defined as the complex relationship between a text and other texts taken as basic to the creation or interpretation of the text. In *Book of Secrets*, Pius Fernandes is the history teacher, when he receives the diary of Corbin from his student, he starts to read and his passion in reading leads to complete the diary but he finds the diary is incomplete. Because it stops before four months of the beginning of the war. He wishes to complete the diary of Corbin. So, he tries to collect history and stretches the past into present with the help of Ali and Rita.

Over the seven years since her death, she often come to haunt his imagination. At first, during his early days in Dar, she would appear as the helpless murdered figure he had discovered on the floor of their shop in Kikongo: Her head moving on one side. Her face looks like as to some degree astounded, her hair remained together (207). Through the lines, where after his wife's dismissal he has his imagination in his mind sometimes this bloody significance of his appearance would him so much of anger causing him so much of imaginations in his mind. These things state Magic Realism causing all sort of imaginable things by the character named Pipa. The imagination of a bloody figure soon disappeared in his mind and he soon admired her as a normal human being in a chair. His imagination views magic realism in the novel. And the people who lived there too come up with a thing if a soul is taken too early then it won't rest in peace soon.

Pastiche is the blend of numerous classes to make a novel account or to remark on circumstances in postmodernity. Pastiche simply means to combine with multiple elements. In this novel, after reading the diary, he tries to investigate the life of Pipa, Mariamu and Ali with the help of Jamali and Rita and wish to reconstruct the history. He wishes to connect the past and present with some missing elements in the diary. His interest in History awakens him to start his research. With the help of Corbin's diary, he tries to reconstruct history. He says, the diary of Corbin is by all accounts secretive and it interfaces with their life and it makes some revenue to research and it is likewise the narrative of the journal itself (7)

Reconstructing history is not at all easy and Vassanji also feels that. To reconstruct history, one must have a keen observation. In an interview with Shane Rhodes, Vassanji discuss the importance of History takes place in one's life. He has also explored it in his works, *The Book of Secrets* and also in *The Gunny Sack*. In his work, *The Book of Secrets*, the diary carries the history and also the novel which the author has produced. In *The Gunny Sack*, the author reveals what is inside in his mind. There is a difference between the Historian and the Narrator, both will handle the History differently. (Rhodes, S. (1997). M.G.Vassanji; An Interview. *Studies in Canadian Literature*, 22(2).

Minimalism in this novel, where the author doesn't have the fixed terms where he puts the question to the audience who is the father of Aku by sometimes putting a question to the audience. But that night Mariamu came to him, turning the mainstream, reasoning on his head: 'I thought you forgave me already... back in kikono... why then send me away now? And how do you expect to leave my son? Isn't he my son too?' 'Pipa said angrily (212).

Mariam too pushes out the traditional concept of being a virgin to his husband but before marriage, he loses the virginity and she possesses as the postmodern elements. And also, Pipa works as a spy for both British and German governments and end up with struggles following from doing it. These things show the identity misplacements by the character to survive in this society not considering what is right and wrong and coming with his conclusions all the time. People even migrated because of the war leading to colonialism where thousands of people carrying their things and moving to different cities and town.

The Germans and the British people leading with their chaos and confusion with their government which the war was happening underlines the government of that era is with false prorogations and coming up with their terms and doesn't bother about the people. Pipa being a normal small shop owner for the people but being a spy for the government is where keeps his character subjectivity but the chaos and sufferings he puts up after being caught by both the officials were at the beginning itself, he doesn't care about the outcomes which it brings for him.

The fact for Aku's father is simply let for the audience point of view in this novel where postmodernism literature always looks for the conclusion within the audience side itself it doesn't let the author decide what to happen in the play or the novel.

Ali, who born in Africa then looked after by his grandparents and led his life by Muslim way of living than back settling in England shows the problem of migration. Ali faces a lot of problems because of the way of living he had and the issues regarding his father and mother. His isolation and the absence of his parents led nowhere but a place of solitude for a certain age. He himself always have doubt in himself about life and the way of living. Although the mind which is filled with confusion before his childhood and after adulthood because of the war which happened strictly brings up the problems of colonial history and his migration at the end where he is partly a half-made British citizen the same way how his father who worked for both the Government.

Ali after returning to his old village where his mother was born, he always had huge things running up his mind in that shop which is led by his father. Ali's mind is always set into contradictory where after he comes to live with his new mother and his sisters the way how he was treated by his family puts more pressure for him.

The Ambiguous mind of Ali though who have been raised by different communities throughout his life, he simply just avoids conclusion to all the details that happened for his mother and without any conclusions or judgements, he leads his life with his own will marrying a girl named Rita without the concern of his parent's will and ideas. Pipa being the owner of a shop wherein his childhood working in a seashore and then being a shop owner brings out the failures and problems he faced during his frequent migrations and also after marriage life because of Mariam's health and issues caused by the war, he transfers to another place and there too he experiences all pressures because of the interference in the war period.

Through this paper it is clear that the author uses some postmodern elements and techniques in his novel. The journey of Pius from his home land to various places to stretch the past to present makes himself to identify himself. The usage of postmodern elements in the novel adds favor to the novel. Vassanji's technique used in the novel makes the reader to get the major theme easily and also it helps to understand the entire novel. The author stretches the past to the present to makes the readers more attentive and the usage of magical elements creates some sort of interest to the readers.

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