

Human Adaptability to Changing Environment: A Study of Vassanji's No New Land

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Abstract- Man has been taking note of the changes in the environment and its effect on himself and other living things. And today, when rapid changes in the surroundings are taking place, it is of primary importance that prepares him to obtain the impact suitably and not to be blown over by the "Future Shock". Rather, he should be capable of converting the changes to his environment. Geographically and historically Canada is a fascinating country, offering its artist a variety of landscape as backdrops, a desirable mixture of races and cultures to provide an indefinite number of themes with suitable ambiances. Anybody interested in making an in-depth study of any part of Canadian literature should keep in mind Taine's formula, le race, le milieu, le moment. The formula is applicable to Canadian writing. Canada with its immigrant laws extends a warm welcome to adventurous to those who are enterprising and willing to find their place in this land and make their contribution to its prosperity. Canada can be proud of Anglo-Saxon and French people. Though off and on they are at each other's throats and through politicians talk of partition of two Canadas, the reality is that there has been fusion going on for quite a long time. To use biological language, if we call them energetic people working for a great country, the energy is partly due to hybrid vigour.

INTRODUCTION

The case of Lalani family in Vassanji's no new land appears to be special. They seem to be driven from pillar to post till at last they reach Canada and after a long period of acclimatization, settle down finally with contentment. At a time when the European countries were establishing their colonies in practically every continent, Britain helped Germany to establish and administer an East African colony of Tanganyika. They knew that Indians could be trustworthy administrators, clerks, menial servants. That was how Indians were taken to Malaya, Burma, Ceylon, the British colonies in Africa, Fiji island,

Mauritius and so on. So, on British advice, the German colonies invited the Indians to come to help them run their colony. In 1906 Haji Lalani came from Gujarat and joined as apprentice to an Indian firm. Soon, by dint of hard work, he prospered and set up his own shop.

When the world war broke out, Britain took over the Germany colony of Tanganyika, but this made no differences to the natives or the immigrants. By this time the Indians who had contributed much to the growth and development of the East African countries believed that they were part and parcel of the East African population. The war however had aroused the patriotic spirit of native black population who wished to drive out the browns along with the whites. The Gujaratis had lost all connections with India and could not think of going back there. They considered themselves to be East Africans and believed they have every right to live there and carry on their normal lives. But the prosperity of the Indians filled the black with jealousy and that made them tell the Asians to get out, along with the Whites. By birth right the Lalanis were East Africans, but Africa disowned them. The erstwhile colonial rulers, the Britishers were expected to accommodate them. But Britain disclaimed them, producing from the migrants the righteous indignation. To their great relief Canada welcome them warmly. The Lalanis, after spending some months with their relations, had to shift and learn to stand on their own legs. The defence which we call 'herd mentality' made them choose to go and find their place where a cluster of Gujaratis's, earlier migrants was holed up. It was group of flats in the fine-sounding Rosecliffe Park Drive looking down upon the Don Valley framed for its scenic beauty, which Canada can boast of in a myriad of its places. The parkway winds its way hurriedly to the city of Toronto. The apartment

buildings were identified by numbers. The Lalanis were allotted an apartment in “Sixty-nine” which unfortunately not well maintained so that there would always be a rush for the elevators which works erratically.

The process of acclimatization begins. It is made easy by the fact that all the neighbours were Gujarat’s. In Canadian cities and towns, it is easy for women to get employed. Zera found employment and became the breadwinner, while Nurdin waited for something respectable to come his way. He would soon learn to take things as they come. For example, Jamal, the lawyer carries a bulging briefcase every morning, stuffed with samosas which he would sell the nearby tuck shop. People could smell the contents of his briefcase but nobody taunted him about it. People have to live. There was also Nanjl who looked so simple and humble that nobody would suspect that he was a professor. Besides, these were a fair sized group of Gujarati’s and other Asians living in the area.

The women of Canada are as free and forward as the women of the United States. In the west virginity had lost its importance. In the orient certain attitude developed during the ancient days of male chauvinism was shaped into a religious right which insist on the bride being a virgin. In Vassanji’s *No New Land*, a white girl suddenly shouts “rape” and accuses Nurdin of having attacked her, nothing actually happened, the girl was blackmailing the man and hoped to get money from him. But the incident left Nurdin a crushed man. It was as if the world was crushed round him. The injustice of the whole thing shattered his faith in himself and in humanity. The White expectedly took the side of the girl and it was being given a racist colour.

Vassanji’s story also traces the growth of Nurdin’s self-awareness and identity and as such belongs to the same subgenre. But gaiety is conspicuous by its absence. Indeed, critics see *No New Land* as a pessimistic novel. It is true that the failure dogs the footstep of Nurdin and he receives the slings and arrows of fate in long succession. But all’s well that ends well and it is at the end that the misfortunes and failures are exercised and he is freed from the influence of bad stars. He finds success happiness at last.

The age old theme is handled in different ways. From time to time in Canada as in England and the

European countries, while hoodlums—skinheads and Neo-Nazis—indulge in what they call ‘paki-bashing’. Vassanji’s is careful to stress that it is not rare in Canada. There is just one incident in the whole novel where the innocent old man Esmail is teased and pushed down from the platform on to the rail-tracks by ill-mannered adolescent boys who are playing something like a frank. That result is that Esmail becomes a hero and wins the sympathy of the entire population.

But in the case of Nurdin Lalanis, the girl attracted general attention by shouting “rape” and won the sympathy of all, except Ramesh. Not only the Lalanis, but all the inhabitants of Rosecliffe Park Drive apartments suffer anguish that such a humiliating case should be foisted on a completely innocent man. The lawyer Jamal succeeded in settling the case out of court, by paying ‘compensation’ to the wretched family of the White girl. This episode resembles an incident in E.M.Forster’s passage to India where Adella’s false accusation of rape by Dr. Aziz triggers of an avalanche of reaction among the English and Indian population.

This moral attack of Nurdin and the physical attack on Esmail are part of the process of becoming absorbed into the mainstream of Canadian society. It is part of their education. Nurdin was so shocked that he could not answer all the questions asked by his wife and children. Nurdin was weary and he sat in silence. Zera sat close to him but felt that there was a small gulf dividing them, a gulf that was created by Nurdin keeping something away from her.

The novel takes the reader to Dar in the East Africa of the pre-war days when Haji Lalani, the father of Nurdin established himself as a respectable trader and own the reputation of being a strict disciplinarian. He used the cane liberally on his children to mould them into good citizens of Tanganyika. The sight of his stern face under the austere Fez Cap used to send shivers through Nurdin’s body. These rigours came to an end when Haji died and later the native Africans kicked them out along with their white colonial rulers. England refused to obtain them and they were over joyed to hear the immigration official in Montreal hailing them with a smile and a “Welcome to Canada”. And at Toronto there were Roshan, Zera’s sister and her husband to obtain them. “Finally a place to lay down your head” (NNL 34)

Nurdin could not find work, but Zera did. In an office, the employer told Nurdin that he was over qualified for the job seemed to Nurdin he had come down in self – esteem and expectation, grasping whatever odd job came his way, becoming a menial in the process.

It is not only the people of Indian origin ejected by Africa or England, but also people from India, Pakistan, Ceylon or any Asian country, who soon begin to feel at home in Canada which is no new land. The high rise apartment building in Don Valley is self -sufficient.

It takes just a single generation for people to become 'neutralized'. When Esmail was attacked the immigrant began to have doubts. Jamal assured them that the incident was first and last and added. One reminded him that they were Sikhs to think of fighting. The official reaction to the attack on Esmail was that the line had been overstepped and could not be allowed to happen again.

But Nurdin had his own problems; first there was the feeling of guilt because of being enamoured of Sushila, though no sin has been committed; then there was the unjust accusation of rape and lastly there was the general dread of things inspired by his stern father, whose portrait, complete with Fez, was there in the hall. At one stroke he was freed from all these troubles by the saint, whom they call the master, who has come all the way from Dar. The master made just one pronouncement; he said "it will alright". It brought great relief of

Nurdin, but much greater relief to Zera whose doubts, suspicious and anxieties disappeared in an instant. The Master is the deus ex machine of the novel. In the rape case Jamal had played his lawyer's part and so the credit should go to him. However, the Machinery had exercised their entire past and restore these to the home of Nurdin.

CONCLUSION

The mixture of cultures that is taking place in North America has been compared to the formation of a pearl within an oyster. The initial irritation is not pleasant but result demands our admiration. To those who can have an insight to Vassanji's No New Land, the message of the novel comes loud and clear, "adapt or perish". The novel describes the painful process of adapting the undergone by a family of

immigrants. They have got to adapt themselves to new and changing environment in a distant land. By extension, the message goes beyond the changes experienced by migration to all kinds of changes in the environment, man-made or nature induced. Geographically, climatically and ecologically the environment everywhere is changing and changing so rapidly that the skill of quick adaptability is put to the greatest test. The change is limited large to the migration.

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