

# “This Was My Country – How Could It Not Be?”: On the Significance of Travel in M. G. Vassanji’s *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall*\*

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## Abstract

M. G. Vassanji’s *The In-between World of Vikram Lall* describes how the life of the eponymous protagonist, a third-generation Asian African, is affected by Kenya’s independence struggle and its post-colonial aftermath. This essay analyses how this novel uses the motif of travel in order to explore the possibilities and difficulties for Asian Africans to make East Africa their true home. It is often through travel that the protagonist re-examines some facets of his “Kenyan” identity.

This essay first explains how the novel reflects the historical particularities of Asian Africans in colonial East Africa, and how those particularities affect the protagonist’s early life and his sense of belonging. It then discusses the significance of the trip his family takes when he is an eight-year-old boy, analysing how this journey allows him to bracket the instability of his identity and deepen his sense of geo-cultural belonging. Next, the journeys the adult protagonist undertakes in post-independent Kenya are examined.

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These trips function as occasions to reaffirm his sense of belonging to the country in spite of the deepening political corruption and his own involvement in it. Lastly, the essay explores the importance of Canada, where he hides himself after fleeing Kenya and writes the autobiography that constitutes most of the novel. The geo-cultural distance between Canada and Africa forces the protagonist to question his relationship with Kenya and ultimately makes him decide to go back to the country.

**Keywords:** *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall*, M. G. Vassanji, Asian Africans, nationalism, travel

In his essay "Algeria's European Minority," Frantz Fanon vividly describes a process of nation building. As the independence movement gradually erodes the structure of the colonial society that has been based upon the notion of absolute difference between colonisers and the colonised, European minorities in Algeria shed their old sense of who they are, identify themselves as Algerians, and get accepted as fellow citizens. "In the new society that is being built," Fanon avers, "there are only Algerians. From the outset, therefore, every individual living in Algeria is an Algerian. In tomorrow's independent Algeria it will be up to every Algerian to assume Algerian citizenship or to reject it in favour of another" (152). This essay is moving, because of Fanon's firm belief that the project of nation building can renew people's sense of belonging and thereby create a new, more inclusive and egalitarian society. At the same time, the essay is all the more poignant because subsequent history has seen too many tragic cases in which decolonisation only leads to violent ethnic conflicts. Read with hindsight, Fanon's essay raises questions as to what has gone wrong.

M. G. Vassanji, who describes himself as "East African Canadian of Indian origin" (Vassanji, "Canada" 24), has consistently explored such issues of belonging, but in different historical and cultural contexts. In his significant discussion on M. G. Vassanji's earlier works, Tirop P. Simatei touches upon one of the writer's most important themes. Some of Vassanji's Asian African characters, Simatei points out, "genuinely believe they belong in East Africa and are aware of their reformulated identities so that despite their origins being elsewhere, East Africa has become part and parcel of their identities and a home more real than any of their imagined origins" (95). Scrutinising how the process of rooting themselves transforms Asian Africans' sense of geo-cultural identity, Vassanji complicates our notion of belonging. In this respect, *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall*, published a few years after Simatei made his observation, is particularly interesting; it is the writer's most serious reflection to date on the possibilities and difficulties for Asian Africans to make East Africa their true home. Describing how the life of the eponymous protagonist, a third-generation Asian African, is affected by Kenya's political independence and its post-colonial aftermath, the novel highlights his complicated relationship with the country and thereby explores the question of belonging.

Given Vassanji's growing reputation and the theme's urgency in the context of our contemporary world, in which we increasingly need to co-exist with people of different cultural backgrounds, it is not surprising that some scholars have already offered insightful readings of the novel. Melissa Myambo examines the tension between cosmopolitanism and nationalism that it highlights, while Nalini Iyer analyses how identities are negotiated by the Indian migrants of different

generations. More recently, examining some theoretical premises of diasporic studies, Robert Zacharias discusses the significance of the protagonist's return from Canada to Kenya.

While the incisive analyses offered by these and other critics certainly helped me to develop my own reading, my interest here is different from theirs. This essay considers how Vassanji utilises the motif of travel in order to explore his theme; travel often forces Vikram to re-examine in depth some facets of his identity. In order to understand why, some insights offered by scholars studying non-fictional travel writing are helpful. Observing that many works of non-fictional travel writing thematise questions of identity, Peter Hulme points out that "physical travel often tends, in its writing, to become symbolic of interior journeys of the mind or soul" (5). Despite the generic difference, in the novel as well journeying functions for the protagonist as an occasion to question who he is by examining his relationship with Kenya, in which he travels. Moreover, if non-fictional travel writing "reflects and influences the way we view the world and ourselves in relation to it" (Youngs 12), Vikram's descriptions of travel within his wider narrative function in a similar manner. His self-understanding influences, and at the same time is influenced by, his view of the world. This essay considers how this dynamic between the self and the world operates for the protagonist who experiences the turbulent history of Kenya's decolonisation and its post-colonial aftermath. For the purpose, it first explains how the novel reflects the historical particularities of Asian Africans in colonial East Africa, and how those particularities affect the protagonist's early life and his sense of belonging. It then discusses the significance of the trip the protagonist's family takes when he is an eight-year-old boy. Third, the journeys the adult protagonist undertakes in post-independent Kenya are analysed. The final section of the essay examines the significance of Canada, where he hides himself after fleeing Kenya and writes the autobiography that constitutes most of the novel.

### **The In-Betweenness of Asian Africans**

The story begins in colonial Kenya in 1953, the year Queen Elizabeth II ascends the throne. In the eyes of the eight-year-old protagonist, the colony's enthusiastic celebration of her coronation inevitably emphasises its close tie with the metropolis and heightens the impression that "the sun would never set" on the British Empire (Vassanji, *The In-Between World* 22). At the same time, however, struggle for independence spearheaded by the so-called Mau Mau has been also gaining momentum, creating escalating violent confrontations between freedom fighters

who resort to the tactics of terrorism and the colonial authorities which institute counter-terrorism. For this reason, when Vikram looks back upon his childhood, it seems to have been imprinted both with "barbarous cruelty and terror" and with "seductive order and security" that is given in exchange for "repressive, undignified subjecthood" (7). In this respect, the protagonist's early life is as much affected by British imperialism as by Kenyan nationalism (Myambo 164).

The novel makes it clear that Vikram's perception of the two opposing tendencies derives from a particular colonial history in East Africa. Historically, while there had been cross-regional contact between India and East Africa for more than 2000 years, it was the establishment of British rule in East Africa in the late nineteenth century that triggered a far larger-scale Asian migration to East Africa. To open up the newly acquired land and encourage white settlement, Britain started to build the Kenya-Uganda railway, the symbolic significance of which for the protagonist I will discuss later. Due to the failure in attracting African workers, nearly 38,000 Indian indentured labourers were imported for the railway construction. While most of them left East Africa once their contracts were over, about 7,000 Asians remained, finding jobs related to the railway or opening small shops in the towns newly appearing along the railway line (Oonk 255). Partly due to the active encouragement from the Imperial British East India Company, these towns soon attracted a far larger number of free immigrants from western India (Ojwang 10-11). After World War I, with the further strengthening of British colonial power in East Africa, many Indians migrated and joined the civil service as lower-ranking officers (Oonk 256). Asians thus provided the necessary labour force for the development and consolidation of the newly established British colonies, and by doing so gradually established their position in the colony (Siundu 17). Their presence was particularly conspicuous in the field of commerce. Their close relationship with India, which was the biggest supplier of the commodities wanted in East Africa in the early twentieth century, gave them a clear commercial advantage (Gregory, *South Asians* 50). Consequently, Asians became economically influential to the extent that, together with Europeans, they remained the main economic force even well after World War II (Oonk 257-8).

The relative economic success Asians enjoyed was closely related to their social position within the hierarchy of the colonial society. It is certainly true that by the 1910s Asians had been subject to imperial rule and racism that underpinned it, and were treated as inferior to Europeans (Gregory, *India* 95). In fact, one of the very factors that turned Asians to commerce was that they were banned from owning land due to open agitation by European settlers (Ojwang 3). Nevertheless, they were still in a comparatively better position than Africans; for instance, the commercial property of Asians was legally protected, whereas that of Africans

was not (12). Such preferential treatment, which derived from and contributed to Asians' relative economic power, was an effect of their social status as middlemen in relation to both Europeans and Africans (Gregory, *South Asians* 21). To put it differently, while contributing much to the colony's economy, they "existed in a liminal category between being colonizer and being colonized" (Nair 90). This intermediary position they occupied had a significant cultural consequence; Asians maintained their own communities without much integration (Sarvan, "M. G. Vassanji's" 512). Their religious belief also contributed to keeping their distinctive cultural and racial identity intact, as it strongly discouraged intermarriage with other ethnic groups (Gregory, *South Asians* 35). Nevertheless, such Asian distinctiveness became increasingly problematic as African nationalism gained momentum; because of the relative economic privilege Asians enjoyed and their perceived racial and cultural distance, Africans increasingly regarded them as colluding with the British without any intention to integrate, and being indifferent to their desire for political autonomy (Sarvan, "M. G. Vassanji's" 513).

The protagonist's family encapsulates such a history of Asians in colonial East Africa and the socio-political position they came to occupy. Vikram's paternal grandfather was one of the Indian indentured labourers who came to Africa for the construction of the Kenya-Uganda railway. Once the indentureship was over, he settled in Nakuru and opened a provision store (18), which Vikram's father seems to have taken over. The fact that the store's main customers are Europeans and the affluent Indians who desire to emulate their lives (8) indicates the family's implicit participation in the Empire's socio-economic structure. Especially, Vikram's father is described as an ardent supporter of the British; the son's retrospective verdict is that he was irretrievably colonial (20). An unabashed Anglophile, he is even moved to tears while listening to the BBC Radio's live broadcast of the new Queen's coronation ceremony (71-3). Such strong internalisation of colonial values leads him to look down on Africans. Belittling the significance and force of African nationalism, he sneeringly suggests that "the Africans should use monkeys to fight the British" (80). Compared with her husband, Vikram's mother is far less subservient to Europeans, partly because her experience of India's independence movement before moving to Kenya for marriage seems to have stirred her ethnic pride. At the same time, however, she has her own reservations about Africans. Despite her innate kindness to Vikram's best friend Njoroge the Kikuyu, she is worried about the closeness between him and her daughter Deepa (9); it is she who later forbids them to marry in the name of unbridgeable racial difference and need for maintaining the Asian community's unity. In short, the portrait of the Lall family strongly reflects Vassanji's view that Asians were "mildly racist and completely communalist and thoroughly colonized, believing in our own exclu-

sivity and in the superiority of the British Empire" (Vassanji, "So As Not" 310).

If the novel critically describes Asians' condescension towards Africans, the latter on their part perceive racial difference as absolute. Despite his gentleness and decency, Njoroge's grandfather cannot imagine the possibility of racial integration and bluntly asks when the Indians will go back to where they came from (100). Even Vikram's best friend Njoroge, looking back upon their childhood many years later, confesses to him: "you were in with the whites, so you had power over us. And you are so alien, more so than the whites. We never know what you think. You are so inscrutable, you Indians" (87). The seemingly easy transition from the past tense to the present tense reveals how deep-rooted Africans' perception of Asians as racial and cultural outsiders is.

At the beginning of the story, the protagonist is too young to understand fully the racially stratified structure of the colonial society. His incomprehension partly derives from the relatively weaker influence of colonial ideologies over children.<sup>1</sup> As Vikram understands later, "barriers of class and privilege were not so inviolable or cruel" at their level (10). For this reason, Vikram and Deepa become friends not only with Njoroge the African but also William and Annie, children of a white farming family, despite racial and class differences. However, it should be emphasised that their world is not entirely free from colonial values. When the two white children show up for the first time, the other three stop using Njoroge's English nickname William, precisely because they instinctively know that the white boy is more entitled to that name in the colonial society (10). For Vikram in particular, the absorption of colonial ideas results in a cultural inferiority complex in relation to the Europeans. For instance, the English that his new European friends speak sounds "sharp and crystalline and musical" in his ears, partly because he knows it to be "the language of power and distinction," by comparison with which his own English seems merely a second-rate imitation (10).

Such a sense of difference from the metropolitan culture is one factor that encourages Vikram to identify himself as a child of Africa. Very different from stereotypical Asians, he feels himself rooted in Africa. Therefore, he proudly proclaims: "We have been Africans for three generations" (16). His "African" identity also partly derives from a generational and psycho-cultural distance from India, his family's real or imaginary homeland. While his mother migrated from India because of her marriage, his father was born and grew up in Africa. Partly because

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<sup>1</sup> For another example, we might recall some of Rudyard Kipling's early stories in which Anglo-Indian children easily cross the racial and cultural boundaries between colonisers and the colonised, which are unbridgeable for English as well as Indian adults.

of his sense of rootedness in Africa, and partly because of his internalisation of colonial values, the father openly despises India as “backward and barbaric” (84). For Vikram the third-generation migrant, the relationship with India is even more tenuous. “India was always fantasyland to me” (20), he bluntly says. He is more engrossed in stories of Africa’s man-eating lions than in tales of Indian mythology (18-9). While his grandfather’s first language is Punjabi,<sup>2</sup> Vikram’s ability to speak it or understand its cultural context is limited (61). In short, India is not an imaginary homeland for this third-generation Asian African. He strongly believes that his home is nowhere but Nakuru, where he was born and grew up (47).

However, Vikram is also keenly aware that his identification with Africa becomes questionable in relation to black Africans, especially vis-à-vis his best friend Njoroge. He reminisces: “I do recall that his being different, in features, in status, was not far from my consciousness. I was also aware that he was more from Africa than I was. He was African, I was Asian” (25). In relation to Njoroge, he is inevitably defined as “Asian,” not as “African” as he hopes. Such a sense of racial and cultural difference becomes particularly acute in the protagonist’s view towards Kenya’s independence movement. While Vikram and his family members see the Mau Mau simply as violent and dangerous troublemakers who would threaten the order of the colonial society, Njoroge praises his fellow Kikuyus’ courage (25). When Njoroge invites the protagonist to participate in a children’s version of Mau Mau’s initiation ritual in order to share cultural pride, Vikram cannot but take it as “a private, debasing and repugnant ceremony” which he was forced to join (94). The inability to sympathise with the independence movement inevitably highlights the distance and difference between Asians and Africans and raises the question of belonging. For these reasons, despite his claim for an African identity, Vikram is almost always aware of his own “in-betweenness.” Even his skin colour, in that it is “neither one (white) nor the other (black)” (25), is perceived as “medium” and therefore as symbolic of the instability of his cultural identity. Unable to identify with either Europeans or Africans, Vikram even feels himself inauthentic and “hollow like a bad penny” (48). Despite his deep attachment to the place where he lives, he is conscious that his status there is very much open to question, and this uncertainty in turn intensifies his desire for a sense

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<sup>2</sup> In this context, it is worth noting that the grandfather’s name was slightly changed from “Anand Lal Peshawari” to “Anand Lall” after he came to Africa. Pointing out that the “Peshawari” means “of Peshawar,” Iyer perceptively reads this change in naming as indicative of “unmoor[ing]” from his ancestral land (207). To put it differently, the name change indicates that the process of cultural hybridisation, which has a defining influence on Vikram’s “African” identity, has in fact already started in his grandfather, whose relationship with India seems stable in his eyes.



of belonging. He even secretly wishes that he had an African relative illegitimately born between his grandfather and some African woman (59), as he or she would strengthen his African identity.

### The 1953 Family Trip

It is because of such a sense of social and psychological instability that the trip his family takes from Nakuru to Mombasa becomes a life-defining moment for the eight-year-old protagonist. Vikram vividly recalls the sensation of viewing the African scenery from the train window:

It was to become aware of one's world, *physically*, for the first time, in a manner I had never done before, whose universe had encompassed our housing estate and my school, the shop and my friends, the tree-lined street outside that brought people in and out of our neighbourhood. That scene outside the train window I can conjure up at any time of the day or night; I would see, feel, and experience it in similar ways so frequently in my life; in some essential way it defines me. This was my country – how could it not be? Yes, there was that yearning for England, the land of Annie and Bill and the Queen, and for all the exciting, wonderful possibilities of the larger world out there. But this, all around me, was mine, where I belonged with my heart and soul. (105)

Here, Vikram instinctively imagines his hometown Nakuru as part of the land of Kenya, identifies that larger geographical entity as his own world, and thereby consolidates his sense of belonging. While Vikram's affection for what he calls "my world" (105) is undoubtedly genuine, Denis Cosgrove's observation on the nature of landscape is helpful to understand how the protagonist seeks to strengthen his bond with Africa. Discussing the ideology of landscape, Cosgrove points out that the perception of the outer world as symbolic landscape can often render the life of its inhabitants invisible (xxvi, 271). Something similar is taking place here: the African landscape enables the protagonist to bracket social and racial conflicts occurring in Kenya. Viewed from the train, Africans look friendly and innocuous. "African herdsmen in skin cloaks waved back at us, women with gourds and baskets on their backs would pause to look up and stare" (105), he reminisces. Such a rhetorical manoeuvre, as Mary Louise Pratt points out in her influential *Imperial Eyes*, also often appears in colonial travel writing. The aestheticisation of landscape, Pratt argues, rhetorically creates "the relation of mastery predicated between the seer and the seen" (204) and thereby contributes to the consolidation of colonial power. Nevertheless, there is also a significant difference between Vikram's case and the colonial predecessors. In colonial travel writing, aestheticised landscape emphasizes the traveler's agency, highlights the cul-

tural distance between the observer and the observed, and consequently creates “the relation of mastery.” In contrast, in Vikram’s narrative, aestheticisation makes it possible for him to put aside, if not totally erase, the ambiguities of his belonging, and thereby minimize the distance between himself and Africa. This is how he stakes his claim to Africa, as is indicated by his emphatic expression, “This was my country – how could it not be.” Equally significant is that once his sense of belonging is thus established, in Vikram’s eyes, the African land begins to look even more attractive than the idealised images of England that colonial culture encourages the colonised people to internalise. The landscape invites him to locate his identity firmly in Africa, not in the metropolis that is symbolised by a London postcard sent by Bill and Annie who visit there on vacation.

Vikram’s sense of belonging is strengthened further by the transportation his family utilises on the trip: the railway. As I mentioned before, his grandfather was one of the Indian indentured labourers who built it. Very proud of this family history, the protagonist-narrator proclaims: “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). Here, the narrator seems to imply that what British colonisers would boast as their imperial achievement simply could not have been possible without the contribution from the Indian labourers such as his grandfather. In fact, Indians’ involvement in the railway is not only in its construction but also its practical management; both in historical actuality (Metcalf 181) and in the novel, the lower-ranking staff was overwhelmingly Indian. For Vikram, the instrumental role Asians play in setting and managing the area’s indispensable infrastructure becomes a key to their sense of belonging, their “claim to the land.”<sup>3</sup> Partly because of this symbolic significance of the railway for the migrants’ sense of entitlement, Vikram even dreams of becoming a locomotive driver and of “racing the length and breadth of the country, from Mombasa to Nairobi, through Nakuru and all the way to Kisumu or Kampala, and then back again, from Indian Ocean to Lake Victoria” (63). The train journey in question is significant, because for the first time he actually witnesses the vast land, possesses it in a symbolic manner, and consolidates his identification with Africa. The railway also confirms his “claim to the land” in a different way. During the trip, the young protagonist observes how Asian migrants have settled along the railway line. “At every stop Indians got on or off, and there were people

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<sup>3</sup> As Robert Zacharias observes (212), in emphasising the Asians’ significant involvement in the railway, Vikram is somewhat blind to their unwitting complicity with colonial oppression; the railway is also used as a measure of the Emergency to transport to reservations the Kikuyu, who are collectively punished for their involvement in the Mau Mau (Vassanji, *The In-Between World* 64). Nevertheless, his very blindness reveals all the more clearly the intensity of the protagonist’s desire for belonging.

who were known to my family. For in each town was an Indian main street" (106), he recalls. Witnessing how his fellow Asians have confidently rooted themselves in the African land consolidates his own sense of belonging. In short, the train journey allows him to put aside the cultural complications deriving from his in-betweenness and to affirm his connection with Africa. For this reason, the trip becomes a life-defining event for the protagonist, so much so that he later comes back to where he visited during this journey whenever his relationship with Kenya becomes doubtful.

However, shortly after the family trip, Vikram is once again, and this time with tragic consequences, forced to confront the question of belonging that it seems to have resolved to some extent. Adopting the strategy of indiscriminate killing of white settlers, the Mau Mau fighters one day kill Annie, whom the protagonist innocently loves, and her family. The violent struggle for independence seeks to demarcate who should or should not belong, and throws into question the possibility for the protagonist of identifying with Kenya. If, as Nalini Iyer also perceptively observes, Vikram's relationship with Njoroge and Annie symbolises "the possibility of creating a Kenyan identity for himself that will allow him equality in this country he considers his own" (209), that possibility is almost completely shattered by the tragedy. Partly for this reason, and partly for the loss of his childhood sweetheart, he suffers serious psychological trauma. He summarises its impact: "I let it deform me, freeze the essential core in me, so that for a large part of my adult life I remained detached from almost everything around me, explaining away this coldness as the result of a stoic, even mystical temperament" (11). For him, detachment becomes the only way to avoid the dangerous repercussions of the question of belonging.

### **Travelling in Post-Independent Kenya**

By the time Vikram becomes a traumatised adult, Kenya had won its political independence. Now I analyse how, in the third section of the novel, a series of domestic journeys he undertakes in post-colonial Kenya highlights the further complication of his sense of belonging.

Historically speaking, Kenya's independence in 1963 had a profound influence on Asian Africans. This is because the African nationalism won its goal by partially dismantling the colony's racially stratified social structure, on which Asians had established their economic prosperity. Once independence was achieved, the new African administration, seeking to create an indigenous middle-class, introduced discriminatory measures that targeted Asians. For instance, in 1967,

citizenship became a legal requirement for being employed or conducting business. This was a huge blow to Asians, as more than two-thirds of them were British citizens (Dubey 23). In subsequent years, many of the premises of Asian businessmen were confiscated and given over to Africans (Gregory, *South Asians* 34, 81). In Vikram's succinct summary, "black chauvinism and reverse racism were the order of the day against Asians" (Vassanji, *The In-Between World* 239). Official and unofficial Africanisation inevitably rendered the socio-cultural position of Asians extremely precarious, making it difficult for them to belong to the nation (Simatei 96). Marginalised in the process of building the new nation, they started to migrate elsewhere. It is estimated that more than 40,000 Asians left Kenya by 1972 for these reasons (Oonk 258). Because of such a "devastation," Vikram feels that "there had descended a sort of numbness upon the city [they] knew" (Vassanji, *The In-Between World* 236).<sup>4</sup>

In the face of such drastic changes, Vikram's family had chosen to stay and take up Kenyan nationality. While Iyer is certainly right in pointing out that the Lalls' decision to stay could be a very pragmatic one given the absence of transnational networks that would help them to settle elsewhere (211), it is equally important that Vikram sees his family's choice as the ultimate proof of their allegiance to the new nation of Kenya (Vassanji, *The In-Between World* 238). As Vassanji states in reference to a wider historical context, Asians' decision to stay in post-independent Africa was a very conscious choice ("Moyez Vassanji" 73). Reflecting the author's historical view, the novel once again emphasises the protagonist's strong desire for belonging.<sup>5</sup> Still, because of unofficial Africanisation policies of the 1970s, he has difficulties in finding a suitable job. Only with the help of his old friend Njoroge, who has by then become a promising bureaucrat, does he manage to win a post at the Ministry of Transport, and soon undertakes several trips to inspect the East African Railways.

On one of his missions, he invites his grandfather to ride on the last run of a

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<sup>4</sup> In addition to the predicament of Asian Africans, the novel emphasizes how Fanon's warning about "The Pitfall of National Consciousness" is depressingly true of post-colonial Kenya, especially by focusing upon the seriousness of political corruption. In the novel, most of the African politicians are too much preoccupied with amassing their own fortunes and consolidating their power to care about the fate of the nation and its people. In addition, the Cold War makes the situation worse. In order to use Kenya as a buffer against communism, Western countries politically and financially support these corrupt politicians. As a result, in one character's phrasing, Kenya has turned into "a country of ten millionaires and ten million paupers" (259).

<sup>5</sup> Importantly, the novel also critically explores the limitation of such commitment to the new nation on the part of Asians, by highlighting how Vikram's parents obstinately refuse to allow their daughter to marry Njoroge. In addition, describing how Vikram's relationship with an Asian girl from a different religious community arouses that community's strong antipathy, the novel implies that Asians are even reluctant to cross their own communal boundaries, let alone inter-ethnic ones.

steam locomotive, and feels “a true and rare sense of pride and accomplishment” (234), partly because of his personal success as a minor public servant that enables him to present a trip to his grandfather, and partly because of his ability to participate in the project of building the new nation; the inspection is conducted in order to demarcate “the Kenya portion of the East African Railways” (239) from that of neighbouring Tanzania, whose adoption of socialist policies antagonises Kenya in the context of the Cold War. Nevertheless, what captivates Vikram is once again the natural beauty of the land, rather than national pride. He describes the beautiful Great Rift Valley as “the expanse of grassland stretching vastly before us in the mist down below, virgin as God created it” (233). Significantly, the landscape evokes the memories of those whom he knows well since his childhood: the Aberdares remind him of Njoroge’s grandfather, whose homeland is beyond the mountains; looking at the dusty plains, he recalls how his grandfather’s best friend married a Masai woman there (233). The fact that he easily associates the landscape with his old acquaintances, including some Africans, implies the degree to which he has psychologically rooted himself in Africa. Nevertheless, the fulfilment of his childhood wish to travel all over Kenya is tinged with some sadness which partly derives from the drastic changes Kenya’s independence has brought about and the uncertain status of Asians. If he used to dream of experiencing the expanse of the Kenyan land and thereby confirming his sense of belonging, the adult protagonist has no choice but to face the increasing difficulty in believing in his Kenyan identity. Hence, his sense of pride in contributing to the nation is ambivalent. This is because, as Stuart Hall once pointed out in a brief discussion of multi-ethnic Britain, belonging necessitates “both identification and recognition” (par. 5). No matter how strong his “identification” with Kenya might be, he cannot obtain “recognition” from his compatriots. “To the African I would always be the Asian, the Shylock; I would never escape that suspicion, that stigma” (267), he resignedly says.<sup>6</sup> For this reason, while he is still thrilled with the expectation of new discoveries on his railway journey, he also feels that “in that intermediate state, between place and place, one life and another life, perhaps there was also a kinship with my own inner nature” (243). Despite his deep attachment to the African land, the journey now points to his ultimate rootlessness, rather than, as in his childhood, the possibility of rooting himself in Africa.

Shortly after this trip, Vikram’s life as a minor public servant drastically changes. His honest refusal to accept a bribe from an Italian company ironically

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<sup>6</sup> By this time, Deepa gave up her dream of marrying Njoroge the African, and resigns herself to an Indian marriage. As Iyer also notices, both siblings are by then painfully aware of the vulnerability of their trans-racial personal values in the face of the political realities of post-colonial Kenya (209).

attracts the attention of a shady African politician, and under his order, he has little choice but to involve himself in a money laundering operation, through which suspicious political donation money (probably coming from the USA for the purpose of supporting Kenya's anti-communist regime) is secretly handed over to some powerful politicians through his Indian connections. For this intermediary role, he becomes known to powerful politicians, and is even personally praised by the president Jomo Kenyatta. Through his meeting with the symbolic figure of the nation, he finally feels recognized and accepted, if tangentially and grotesquely. It is partly because he desperately seeks to maintain this precarious sense of acceptance that he keeps on working as an intermediary and at the same time is gradually dragged into corruption.

Curiously, however, the protagonist's attitude toward his own involvement in corruption is very cynical. He explains his philosophy:

To me the world was what it was, a far from perfect and a tangled manifold. It was not for me to change this world. Moral judgements, therefore, I shied away from, and this became the secret of my success . . . . I . . . prefer my place in the middle, watch events run their course. This is easy, being an Asian, it is my natural place. (285)

By this time, many Kenyans have been increasingly disillusioned with the malfunctions of their newly independent nation. Vassanji highlights this sense of frustration through the change of Njoroge's political stance. Initially, he was an enthusiastic supporter of Kenyatta, hoping that the new nation would make a difference. Out of bitter disappointment with Kenyatta's corrupt regime, however, he becomes increasingly critical of it, openly questions its legitimacy, and in the end is assassinated. In contrast, however, Vikram's phrase "to me the world was what it was" indicates that he simply refuses to see the situation from a moralistic viewpoint and gets involved in the deepening corruption. As I already pointed out, Vikram's cynical detachment derives from his childhood trauma triggered by the upheaval of the independence movement that is symbolised by Annie's death. At the same time, the cynicism in question is deepened because of his bitter disillusionment with the nation's reluctance to accept him as its true citizen. Feeling that he is marginalised in post-colonial Kenya because of his ethnicity, he justifies his own unethical conduct in the name of that very ethnicity<sup>7</sup>; the only way to survive, he seems to think, is by playing the middleman's role that has been traditionally associated with Asians (Myambo 180). The precariousness of his status is in fact corroborated when his burgeoning career as a

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<sup>7</sup> Significantly, however, the novel implicitly relativises and questions such self-justification by Vikram, by juxtaposing his life with Njoroge's. Importantly, Njoroge's idealism and concomitant criticism against the government are not determined by his ethnicity.

bureaucrat suddenly comes to an end; once the illegal donation starts to go to the politicians more efficiently, he is deemed as a security risk and mercilessly sacked. Through this incident, he painfully realises that he, with his Indian origin, is after all a “convenient scapegoat” and “disposable outsider” (301).

With this bitter disappointment, Vikram seeks some solace in Jamieson, a forgotten, defunct railway station that he found in his earlier inspection journey. Looking at the landscape he loves from a train, he cannot but question himself: “I told myself how desperately I loved this country that somehow could not quite accept me. Was there really something prohibitively negative in me, and in those like me, with our alien forbidding skins off which the soul of Africa simply slipped away?” (303). For the protagonist who has such deep sadness for the impossibility of national belonging, Jamieson offers some consolation. There, an old couple, a British woman Janice and an African man Mungai, live in abject poverty. While Vikram himself does not understand exactly why he is attracted to this place (243), the likely reason is that Janice achieves what Vikram has not been able to; as Myambo also observes (185), Janice manages to root herself in Kenya, even though she lives with deep trauma similar to Vikram’s; her ex-husband and children were brutally killed by robbers. At the same time, Janice’s life with Mungai, in which “there was a quiet, gentle intimacy between them, and also a deep difference they did not pretend to bridge” (Vassanji, *The In-Between World* 305), proves that egalitarian multiracial coexistence is difficult but nonetheless still possible. In other words, Jamieson is important for him, precisely because the place enables him to imagine a way to connect himself with Kenya without the mediation of corrupting politics. Because of this symbolic significance, he goes back to Jamieson when his sense of belonging is seriously questioned.

Surprisingly, even after losing his job as a public servant, Vikram maintains and even expands his influence as someone who can talk directly to the president Jomo Kenyatta. Ironically, his expulsion from the political centre makes him a powerful intermediary between Asian or foreign businessmen and influential African politicians. Even after Kenyatta’s death, he manages to maintain his influence. During the 1980s, he remains the elites’ “banker of choice, the alchemist who could transmute currencies, the genie who could make monies vanish and produce gold out of thin air” (335). For Vikram, who is marginalized because of his ethnic background, participating in the increasingly deepening corruption is the only way to maintain connection with the powerful African elites and thereby secure a tenuous sense of belonging to the nation. Nevertheless, with the end of the Cold War, Vikram’s influence quickly diminishes. The Western countries, which used to turn a blind eye to the government’s malpractice in order to use the nation as a bulwark against communism, suddenly begin to demand accountability, and Vikram,

without reliable backing, once again becomes a target. Made into a scapegoat for the elites' misconduct, he is widely condemned as the most corrupt man in Kenya (346).

In Antonija Primorac's reading, Vikram's extensive involvement in corruption without taking a moral stance makes his avowed allegiance to Kenya questionable (138). It is important to note, however, that the protagonist returns to Jamieson twice more. His first return journey takes place when Kenyatta dies. Feeling anxious about his own safety with the loss of the important protector, Vikram entrusts to Janice and Mungai a set of documents that he hopes to be his bargaining chip, as they would prove the powerful politicians' complicity with his dubious dealings. One reason why Vikram leaves the documents in Jamieson is that he wants to come back one day to this symbolically significant place. When he does come back to Jamieson for the last time, after his self-exile in Canada, he even dreams of starting a new life there, "a life as simple and pure as a mountain stream from the green misty Aberdares" (360). While he himself knows that this is an impossible dream, his attachment to Jamieson reveals that he is still yearning for a way to root himself in the land. His domestic journey illustrates that his sentiment for Kenya is deep and genuine, however morally questionable his way to survive in the post-independent country might be. His travel is thematically crucial in that it highlights how Kenya's malfunctioning nationalism allows him to belong only in a grotesque manner, despite his strong identification with the land.

### The Significance of Canada

In addition to the domestic travel that plays a key role in Vikram's questioning of his relationship with Kenya, his narrative thematises another type of journey, his yearlong sojourn in Canada. After he is made the scapegoat for Kenya's corruption and feels anxious about his own safety, he hides himself in a fictional Canadian town of Korrenburg and writes his autobiography there. In what way, then, is the location of Canada significant? If, as Sarvan points out in his review of *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall*, the word "in-between" in the title partly refers to the geo-cultural interstices between Kenya and Canada (84), what dynamics exists between the two countries?

First and foremost, Canada offers the protagonist quiet space and time to reflect upon his life in Kenya. At the beginning of his writing, Vikram states: "In this clement retreat to which I have withdrawn myself, away from the torrid current temper of my country, I find myself with all the time and seclusion I may ever need for my purpose" (3). Staying away from the political disturbances in Kenya,



he can leisurely trace back his relationship with the country. Geographical distance allows him to reflect upon his life in East Africa from a somewhat detached viewpoint, and thereby accords certain credibility to his narrative.

Nevertheless, Canada is more than mere background for Vikram's narrative; it is Canadian nature that triggers his deep self-reflection. "One more thing for which I am grateful to this hideaway is that it has brought me in touch with the sky and the earth, and through them, with myself" (328), he says. Contact with nature gives him an opportunity to reflect upon, and eventually come to terms with, his past. In this respect, it is symbolic that Vikram, during his stay in Korrenburg, finally decides to part with the pictures of the brutally murdered Annie and her family members, something he had not been able to do for so many years while in Kenya (306-7). If he has been deeply traumatised by the upheavals of Kenya's decolonisation, Canada enables him to face his psychological wound to a certain extent.

Speaking of Vikram's psychological healing, Seema Chatterjee, a local librarian of Indian origin, also plays a significant role. Partly because of sharing diasporic background – her family, originally from East Bengal, became refugees at the time of India's Partition (101) – she starts to take care of Vikram as a fellow Indian and their relationship gradually deepens. She becomes the first reader of Vikram's autobiographical writing and thereby plays the role of his "confessor" (283). Nevertheless, her role is not limited to listening to what he has to say; she also questions and criticises his unethical conduct. As I already pointed out, Vikram's cynicism that drags him into deeper corruption is closely related to his view that his Asian background has severely limited the possibility of belonging to the nation and determined the course of his life. Because he regards himself as a victim of history, he feels that his "life simply happened, without deep designs" on his part (271), and such passivity leads to his indifference to morality. Seema's philosophy cannot be more different; she perhaps naively but firmly believes that it would be possible to change the status quo if a sufficient number of people "cared and did little things that perhaps could add up" (319). Therefore, she criticises Vikram's apathy as irresponsible. While he often feels her criticism too one-sided and too judgemental, her idealism gradually influences him; her moral rectitude eventually forces him to confront his own involvement in corruption, and through the dialogue with her, he finally accepts his responsibility. Near the end of his stay in Canada, he reaches a conclusion so different from his earlier belief: "I am actually quite the simpleton. I long believed that mine were crimes of circumstance, of finding oneself in a situation and simply going along with the way of the world. I've convinced myself now that this excuse is not good enough" (344). This change is significant not only because he finally admits his political liability, but

also because it implicitly opens up a new way of conceptualising his relationship with Kenya. Acknowledging his responsibility for corruption is possible only by denying his earlier view that his ethnicity virtually conditioned his life. This denial enables him to envision a new rapport with Kenya, in which a sense of responsibility as citizen, not ethnicity, should be the most important criteria for belonging. Admittedly, this possibility is rather abstract, but for Vikram who has deep attachment to the country, it is attractive enough to take a chance. It is partly for this new possibility, and partly for the new awareness of ethical responsibility<sup>8</sup> that in the final chapter of the novel, Vikram goes back to Kenya in order to gain an amnesty in exchange for testifying to the committee investigating political corruption. In short, through his dialogue with another diasporic Indian, he succeeds in relativising his ethnic and political position.

This decision to go back to Kenya is also influenced by another factor of Canada. Despite his deepening relationship with Seema, he eventually feels it impossible to stay and learn to belong to Canada. Towards the end of the story, he mulls over the option of staying in Canada: "Do I belong here – in this wonderful country where the seasons are orderly, days go past smoothly one after another . . . . No. I feel strongly the stir of the forest inside me; I hear the call of the red earth, and the silent plains of the Rift Valley through which runs the railway that my people built, and the bustle of River Road; I long for the harsh, familiar caress of the hot sun" (343-44). Canada's climate, despite its perceived clemency, ultimately alienates him and evokes nostalgia. He concludes that the country cannot be his home. Canadian landscape makes him recognise his roots and where he really wants to belong.

When Vikram finally returns to Kenya despite considerable danger, "the feel of the cool Nairobi night" tells him that he is home; "this is where you belong," he tells himself (353). Nevertheless, it remains unclear whether he is really allowed to belong. While the fact that his widowed father now lives with an African woman (369) can be read as a sign of hope for racial co-existence (Fisher 59), the story ends with a pessimistic tone; in the final scene, the apartment in which the protagonist is temporally hiding himself is set on fire, presumably by arsonists sent by the powerful politicians who do not want him to testify to the Anti-Corruption Commission. As Françoise Kral points out, Vikram might be too naïve to believe that he can clear his name (66), but such naïveté is inseparable from his poignant longing for a sense of belonging to the country. By using the motif of travel,

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<sup>8</sup> The newly found sense of ethical responsibility also affects his relationship with Njoroge's son Joseph. Vikram decides to go back to Kenya, partly in order to save him, has been gets arrested for his involvement in a protest campaign against the corrupt government (349).

Vassanji highlights Vikram's self-questioning as to his relationship with Kenya, and thereby makes us consider the meaning of belonging in our own contexts.

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## 非我家園？： 華山吉《維克蘭拉爾的中間世界》 中旅行的意義

### 摘要

華山吉2003年作品《維克蘭拉爾的中間世界》描述第三代亞裔非洲人，維克蘭拉爾的生活如何受到肯亞獨立運動與後殖民統治後續的影響。這篇論文試圖分析小說如何運用旅行主題來探索亞裔非洲人認同東非的可能性與困難度，透過旅行論述，檢視主角維克蘭拉爾對於肯亞身份認同的種種複雜面向。

論文分為三個部分：首先探討小說如何反應東非亞裔非洲人的歷史特殊性，深入這些特殊之處如何影響拉爾的生活與歸屬感，進而分析童年時期的拉爾所經歷的旅行如何突顯他的身份不確定性，加深他對於地理文化上的認同感。其次，檢視成人之後的拉爾於後獨立時期肯亞的旅行。即使當時肯亞政治崩壞，這些旅行仍加深了他對肯亞的認同感。最後一部分探討加拿大的重要性。加拿大是拉爾逃離肯亞之後的棲身之處，加拿大與非洲之間的地理文化因緣使得拉爾省思他和肯亞之間的連繫，而終究讓他決定回歸肯亞。

**關鍵字：**維克蘭拉爾的中間世界、華山吉、亞裔非洲人、國家主義、旅行

