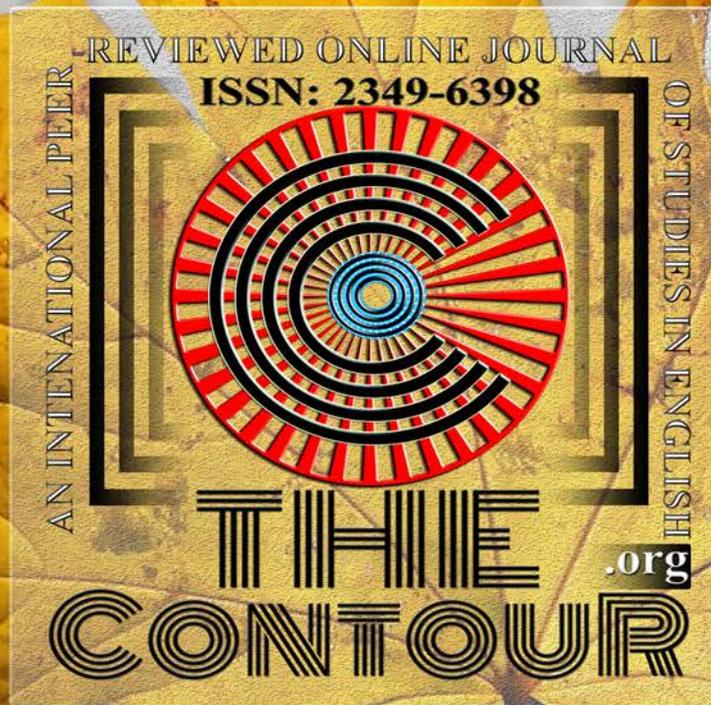


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Revisiting racism in M. G. Vassanji's *The Magic of Saida*

Arup Chandra Das

**Assistant Teacher
Margram High School
Margram, Murshidabad
West Bengal, India**

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Abstract

*Racism is the belief of one race assuming to be superior to those communities inferior to them in terms of economy, politics, culture and society. They are to be inhumanly discriminated and thereby treated as the other. History gives many instances of racism deep-rooted in society like the Holocaust, apartheid regime in Africa, slavery in East Africa and the segregation in the United States etc. M. G. Vassanji as a postcolonial writer never fails to focus on racism and other discriminatory practices of the European colonisers colonising the blacks. In *The Magic of Saida* (2012), one of his most famous novels, Vassanji has portrayed the vivid picture of the practice of slavery of one generation and protest and resistance of the next generation, of course, geared by education and culture, against the racial outlook of the whites. The concurrent attempts of the protagonists to be assimilated with the superior culture get into conflict with their backward pull of tradition and sinister rites related to their native culture and history. An attempt had been made in this paper to trace how far the author is able to portray the protagonists' attempts to reform their cultural and racial backdrops and get assimilated with the European culture and practices.*

Keywords: race, racism, chotara, golo, slavery, colonization

Introduction:

Racism works as a prime factor for the buildup of the conflict between us and them, high and low, white and dark, superior and inferior, oppressor and the oppressed, the western and the native etc. It is an ever evolving process of our society which continually produces the terms like natives, sub citizens etc. Race is the criteria by which one's individual importance is valued and judged in a society, a community and even a country. Whereas one is racially black, he/she cannot enjoy any sort of privilege that the racially superior people enjoy in their lives. It is often thought that a racially poor man cannot have the right to make any progress in life no matter whether he/she is potential in any field. The racial conflict is one of such issues in postcolonial studies which do not prioritize the racially other people who are consequently pushed to the background.

Racism is the thought that one's race is superior to the other race. Racism is "the contemporary discourses and practices that try to keep the other at a distance, to segregate him/her to get rid of him or her and in more extreme cases to expel or to destroy him or her." (Wieviorka, 1992) Racism is not only a form of colonial domination and inferiorization but also the practice to exploit people



in the name of their racial and biological attributes. In the 18th and 19th centuries the European colonisers made the natives slaves who had to suffer from ‘the white man’s burden.’ Slave trade was common in Africa where kinship structure was prevalent in society. Children of slaves could not get entrance into the master’s kinship group or rise to prominent positions if they had the wish to do so. The natives in Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978) have been discriminated and barred from enjoying cultural, political, civil, economic and social rights. To the people of the West the East is a place of ignorance. Their identity is in crisis as they are dehumanized and dominated by the European colonisers. In *Imperialism and Sexual Difference* (1986) Spivak identifies a cultural norm of white male as a political trope. It signifies that the whites symbolically represent the vibrant powerful masculinity while the blacks hold the characteristics of submissive femininity. “The displacement, racial discrimination and the generation differences put hindrances in the way to formulate an independent individual identity.” (Roy, 2013) Postcolonial discourses attempt to focus on the way the colonised natives assimilate into the white society.

According to Peter Bohmer (1999), what Marxist theory says about racism is that it serves the interests of the capitalist or employer class by dividing black and white workers reducing their potential unity and thus their bargaining power. Racism is a system of oppression of the people of colour and the ideology of white supremacy and black inferiority. The racially marginalized people try to raise their voice against the colonial domination and bondage. The trials and tribulations of the racially dominated people are a recurrent theme in the prominent texts of the postcolonial Diaspora writers. These may include Nadine Gordimer’s *My Sons Story*(1990), Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*(1899), Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*(1958), J. M. Coetzee’s *Waiting for the Barbarians*(1982), Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* (1981), Michael Ondaatje *The English Patient*(1992) Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth*(1961)etc.

Jonah Ruskin said, “modern novelists – from Conrad to Lawrence, from Kipling to Orwell, from Forster to Cary have been preoccupied with race with cultural and national conflicts.”(1971) E. M Forster in *A Passage to India* (1924) tried to depict racism and oppression of Britain ruling over India. M G Vassanji is an East Asian African Diaspora writer who traces the movements of the Asians from Africa to North America. He has portrayed in his novels the racial stereotyping of the dislocated and hyphenated people of East Asia and Africa. Vassanji was born in Nairobi, Kenya, brought up in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania and went to the United States to study physics. His life is characterised by ‘a complex ethno cultural identity’ incorporating multiple countries (Kenya, Tanzania, Canada, India, and USA), religions, languages and professions. He has written six novels so far namely *The Gunny Sack* (1989), *No New Land* (1991), *The Book of Secrets* (1994), *Amriika*(1999), *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall* (2003) and *The Assassin’s Song* (2007). He has also written two collections of short stories and two nonfictions and twice won the Giller Prize and Commonwealth Prize.

Brief storyline:

In 2012, his recent book *The Magic of Said* was published. The novel is “an ambitious passionate work about racial identity, deracination and the irresolvable mysteries of the human heart.”(Kirkus Review)It is a haunting novel of mystery, history and past events. Kamal Punja, a physician in



Edmonton, Canada was born in Kilwa as a 'chotara' (a Swahili term meaning half-caste), a mixed blood of an absent Indian father and Swahili African mother of slave ancestry. His father abandoned the mother to go back to his Indian father. Leaving behind his childhood love Saida, Kamal had to leave his mother and go with his uncle Jaffu Ali Punja to live with their Indian community in Africa. Kamal then goes to Mkerere University to study medicine in Uganda but as Idi Amin comes to power Kamal and Shamim, his girlfriend and later his wife immigrate to Canada. Thirty five years later Kamal a famous successful doctor returns to Kilwa by his magical bond and love for Saida, his childhood friend. The story unfolds many details of the Maji Maji rebellion, slavery of the East Africans, the export of the African slaves to India, Idi Amin's atrocities against the Asians in Uganda etc.

Kamal: a chotara

The sense of discrimination and demarcation results in a sort of hyphenation between two identities, two worlds, two spaces. The in-between space is a space of compromise where there is no fixed or stable point. The hyphenation arises from the difference between the coloniser and the colonised. Colonial oppression compels man to adapt to the high culture and dominant identity within their racial boundaries. In their attempt to cross the racial boundaries they are hindered at the threshold of the two doors, the one already shut up and the door to be open, of the two worlds, the old and the new, the domestic and the foreign. This threshold is the liminality which the migrants and the natives in each of Vassanji's novels often experience in their diasporic journey.

Homi Bhabha (1994) persistently argues that the Self/Other dualism creates a sort of "cultural ambivalence", "interstitiality" or inbetweenness which is "the Third Space of enunciation that destroys the mirror of representation facilitating the transfer between the Centre and its margins." "It is the inter – the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the in-between space – that carries the burden of meaning and culture. It makes it possible to begin envisaging national and anti-nationalist histories of the people. And by exploring this Third Space, we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of ourselves." (Bhabha, 1994)

When Kamal was 11 years old his mother sent him to an estranged father's family. Jaffu Ali said to Kamal "you are now a Mhindi, an Indian, and will live like a Mhindi. You will go to a good school and you will learn. Your father wanted that. Forget about the past. It is over." (186) 'Kamal's father left behind evidence of his fall from Indian respectability – having gone local, fathered a half-breed, an outcaste whom he could never call his own back in Gujarat.' (27) 'Slowly, slowly he learned to bend his tongue to utter Kihindi. He could never call it by its Indian name, Kutchi; to him it was always Kihindi. The language of *kin ai*, and *thikai* and *kemchhe*. He spoke it with a certain lilt, a musical accent, and he would tend to put vowels at the end of the words, the Swahili way: *mamedi*, *booti*, *foulo*. This manner of speaking, his dark brown skin, and his curly hair set him apart in his new, Indian environment. He was the local chotara, the half caste.' (194-5) Kamal is ostracized for being too African to the Indians living in Africa and too Indian for the Africans. But when Idi Amin comes to power and expels all Asians he flees to Canada. 'Kamal could never get the African out of him, even when he washed himself with bleach to get his muddy brown out.' (28)



'But that's what he was in Dar es Salaam: Golo, African; the chotara, the half caste Indian; mouthing Indianisms with increasing fluency, occasionally stumbling.'(195) "My mother abandoned me and broke my world?"(183) Kamal had to become a Shamsi. A singing Indian.'(193) Everyone had a nickname in school, and his was Golo. It was friendly; even to this day, Kamal said, some of his friends knew him as Golo.'(195) Being a Golo, 'the dark curly-haired half African', Kamal had the blood of an African warrior. Sabini would laugh: "you are a rogue Kamalu, and a true Swahili."(203)

Kamal became a 'half caste bastard' (240) The making of Golo into an Indian of the Shamsi community meant that he had to learn their language and worship their gods, sing weird hymns to them.'(214) 'He was African, the Indian part didn't matter. He could not speak the Indian language correctly, and his English sounded African, was often brutally imitated.'(227) But 'how could this Golo, with the dark chotara skin and curly hair that screamed "Unteachable!" and "Donkey!" learn to sing the Indian ginans whose ragas were stranger than the film tunes that came on the radio.'(216)

'His skin colour was rarely an issue now, he had grown into the Shamsi community, he was one of them, though a dark one. His Swahili intonations had gradually been smoothed away under the clamour of two Indian languages and English.'(237) 'It was the Golo in him who sent up the partial cheer for Idi Amin. It was the half-caste who had identified with the house servants ("boys"), flinched at their abuse and humiliations, and suffered his own share of them in school. It was the boy who has cried for his African mother and his special friend in Kilwa. He recalled his horror and shame when he saw a young African woman coming out of his uncle's back room. He had been reminded of his mother – and wept at night because he was nothing but a half-caste bastard.'(261)

German colonization:

Colonization sows the seeds of racism. Ashcroft claims "racial discrimination was in the majority of cases, a direct extension of colonial policy and continued to receive both overt and covert support from the ex-colonial powers."(Ashcroft et al, 2001, p 44) The Germans 'broke the rules of our elders, our sharia. For disobeying which, kiboko, the whip. For this misdemeanour, the khamsa-ishirin, for that one, the same. The twenty five referring to the number of lashes, delivered so hard they made you bleed and weep like a woman. Not for nothing we remember the German as mkonowadamu; the hand of blood. As the song says, the Arab put us in chains, the German whipped us raw, and the British sucked our blood.'(69) Vassanji's society was compartmentalized on racial ethnic bases.

African slavery:

The roots of European racism lie in the slave trade. African slaves helped build European nations as economic powerhouse. When Germany acquired her colonies the kidnapping of natives and the resulting trade in slaves were rampant in East and West Africa. British researcher Richard Burton found that during the 1860s twenty thousand slaves were sold annually from Kilwa to Zanzibar. Towns like Bagamoyo, Zanzibar, Kilwa, Tabora were scars of slave trade. African, Asians and indigenous people were the victims of slave trade. While reconstructing the history of Kilwa,



Kamal mentions slavery vital for the lost story. In the slave trade across the Atlantic the Africans were transported to slave markets to North and South America. Kamal's mother tells Kamal: "the sea holds many secrets, you understand? Kilwa is an old town. Slaves were brought here, from the south. Many died. Others? – sent off to Zanzibar, Bagamoyo. Arabia. India." "There were African slaves in India? Slaves everywhere." (49) She also reveals that slaves were captured and sold 'at the market here in Kilwa. One day his men captured my grandmother who was Matumbi. Makungunya sold her to an Indian.' (50) Kamal's nickname was 'golo' when he was in school in Dar. 'Golo' means a slave or servant. Kamal mentions that the Africans being stupid "were chained and taken as slaves, Africans are the most stupid and uneducated in the world. And I am amshenzi, the most uncivilized of Africans. My grandmother was amtumwa, a slave." (228) Shamim is outraged: "how can you allow yourself to be called a slave. Where is your pride?" (195)

The end of chapter seven reveals Kamal's grandmother's slavery and Kilwa being the centre of East African slave trade. Kamal's Mama confesses to him that she was a Matumbi – "the bravest of people, who live on those hills in the distance." Makungunya, also known as Hassan bin Omari, one of the Yao people "captured slaves and sold them at the market, here in Kilwa. One day his men captured my grandmother, who was a Matumbi. Makungunya sold her to an Indian." (50) "One gang of lads and women, chained together with iron neck-rings, was in a horrible state, their lower extremities coated with dry mud and their own excrement and torn with thorns, their bodies mere frameworks and their skeleton limbs slightly stretched over with wrinkled parchment like skin." "In Kilwa, the roads upon which the crooked black lines of slaves passed were called the "places of the skulls" by the locals. Some slaves were 'owned by Indians, who used them as concubines, their womenfolk not having joined them, and as servants, and they sold them to pay debts.' (28)

Assimilation:

According to Milton Gordon assimilation can be described in three terms such as assimilation, acculturation and incorporation. "All three describe the process when persons with various cultural backgrounds come into contact and during this contact form a context for a common cultural life." (Gordon, 1964) To assimilate means "to turn something into an entity having the same pattern as the agent's own nature, ... to incorporate into a system to integrate losing the former ethnic and cultural identity and thus fully integrating into the host society" (Oxford English Dictionary). To assimilate is to be 'sandwiched between two cultures.' Assimilation is to assimilate with the colonial culture by the colonised people. This is an articulation of the oppressed people for self identity or self-definition. It is a postcolonial claim to refuse to 'acknowledge the superiority of the western cultures.' (1990) The postcolonial discourse emphasises on reconstruction and resistance. In the attempt of self-definition one assimilates identity with the superior race and culture and to adjust with the new and different environment. Homi. K Bhabha (1994) observes that "the displaced people move from home culture to alien culture leading to an assimilated culture." (407) After the marriage of Kamal and Shamim, 'they had become Canadians, and as he liked to say, Canada had become them. They carried no bitterness for past insults, because they had been so successful.' (270) Zera Auntie encouraged Kamal to go on and settle down with Shamim and be



happy. She said: “how nice! – you will be in Vilayat, among the whites! You will become a white! All the snow!” (264)

Conclusion:

Racial difference is a crucial issue representing the change in the socio cultural scenario in the lives of the East African Asians and the indigenous Africans. Due to his lived experience of recurrent power politics, difference in races and ambivalent identity, Vasaanji earns success in his attempt to portray the racial boundaries and conflicts in the society of the people. The Europeans attempted to control the native Africans by seizing them and reducing them to slavery. This resulted in the MajiMajiwar (1905-1907), one of the resistance movements against the German rule. The uprising of the Matumbi tribesmen paved ways for the uprising of the other nationalist movements. Though numerous Africans died in the wars but the imperial regime instituted some reforms for the wellbeing of the Africans. Such stirring of nationalism is a unifying experience where different people come under one umbrella to establish a nation free from foreign domination and discrimination.

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Bio-note: Mr. Arup Chandra Das is an Assistant Teacher of Margram High School. He did his MA in English from Banaras Hindu University in 2011. He qualified UGC NET in English in the same year. He has published eleven research articles in different International journals. He is member of the Advisory Board of Indian International Journal of Humanities, Arts and Social Science Research.

