

ETHNICITY AND DISPLACEMENT IN MULTICULTURAL SOCIETIES: LOOKING FOR THE ROOTS IN M.G.VASSANJI'S THE MAGIC OF SAIDA

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Abstract

The return of immigrants from the Western countries into the country of origin is increasingly becoming a dominant theme in Canadian ethnic fiction. This article seeks to attribute this return to the multiculturalism, a system that identifies immigrants upon their ethnicities, race in specific. Once the immigrants have problems with ethnicity, they feel they are unrecognized, and their existence in Canada does not make sense. This feeling takes them back into the country of origin to explore their ethnic background. These critical ideas are to be discussed in the light of events and characters of *The Magic of Saida* by the Canadian M. G. Vassanji. This research intends to show the difficulties faced by people who are born to parents from mixed race.

Keywords: ethnicity, displacement, Canadian, immigrants, multiculturalism

Introduction

Among the criticism that charges the Canadian experience of multiculturalism is that a 'hyphen identity' is imposed on the immigrants. According to this type of identification, the immigrants are seen both ethnically and in terms of the host country separated with hyphen. More clearly, when an immigrant is identified, for example, as a Chinese-Canadian, 'Chinese' represents the ethnicity of the immigrant, whereas, 'Canadian' refers to the nationality of the host country (Bissoodath, 1994). Thus, the explored ethnic background is a must for immigrants in Canada to avoid any problem of identification. Otherwise, a sense of estrangement is felt and may turn into a sense that Canada is not a home to stay in. This motivates the immigrants to leave Canada for the country of origin in an attempt to identify and explore their roots. These critical ideas are to be pursued in the story of Kamal Punja, a major character in *The Magic of Saida* by M. G. Vassanji.

Significance of Ethnicity

The Canadian experience of multiculturalism shows that the immigrants, whose ethnic background are uncertain, suffer much more than other immigrants. The Canadian society categorizes, evaluates, and treats immigrants upon their ethnicity. In theory, ethnicity is composed of both race and culture (Eriksen, 2002), but the Canadians reduce one's ethnicity to his/her physical appearance. An immigrant may be identified, for example, as a Chinese if he/she looks like Chinese. Kamal Punja, who is born to an Indian father and an African mother, has an exceptional appearance. He is an African in terms of his hair and skin colour and an Indian in facial features. Kamal does not represent a single race to be recognized in a multicultural society.

The story of Kamal Punja over ethnicity starts early. As a boy, once he asks his mother, Hamida, whether he is

Indian or African. The mother answers, "You find out the answer when you grow up" (p. 38). Since then, the ethnicity issue has turned into an obsession with Kamal. In his fifties, the well-established doctor Kamal realizes that it is the time to find the answer for that riddle. In Canada, Kamal, who is confused over his ethnicity, develops a sense of isolation. This sense comes from the fact that people around him enjoy cherishing their ethnicity. His three cousins with whom he has grown up in the same house in Dar Essslam, for example, don't keep contact with him. Azim, Yasmin, and Shenaz, are in "close touch with each other" (p.268). But, none of them contacts Kamal simply because he is not *purely* Indian. For Kamal, his cousins don't like to meet him because they don't like to have "the wool-haired dark *Indian* (sitting) among them" (p. 267).

Due to his uncertain ethnicity, Kamal's sense of isolation becomes more painful when it comes to his relationship with Shamim, his wife. He is jealous of Shamim who seeks her Indianness by making ethnic friendship and affiliating to Indian ethnic community. He enviously observes that "Shamim had identified more with her Indianness. She went to [ethnic house] 'khano' Friday evenings, dressed up in a shalwar-kameez..." (p. 272). This gives Kamal a sense that he is "incomplete [and] unfulfilled" (Ibid). However, the ethnically disturbing life motivates Kamal to re-examine his existence in the host country and his connectedness to the country of origin.

Stages of Displacement

New theories about displacement have recently come into existence. One of these theories is presented by Neil Bissoodath, who speaks about displacement in a more comprehensive sense. He theorizes that the roots of immigrants are not located in one single place or country. Instead, these roots are contained in every country that

these immigrants have been to. On the personal level, Bissoondath descended from an Indian family which was twice displaced; once into Trinidad from India in the nineteenth century and the second time into Canada from Trinidad in 1960. He makes it clear the one is the outcome of the various sources that shapes one's life.

My own roots are portable...My roots travel with me, in my pocket... They are, in the end, the sum of my experience, historical, familia and personal. They are, in the end, my sense of self (p. 26).

Bissoondath looks at displacement in terms of the experiences one gains in different countries. However, Bissoodath's vision on roots of immigrants is clearly reflected in M. G. Vassanji's *The Magic of Saida*.

Kamal Punja, the main character, has descended from an ethnic group that has been displaced twice: Once from India into Africa as indentured workers in 19th century second from Africa into Canada as refugees in 1970s. However, Kamal's attempt to explore his origins works as a displacing factor that takes him outside Canada, into two different continents, Asia and Africa where a part of his family records are rooted.

To explore a family, one has to know first where to go and whom to talk to. The story of Kamal with the first stage of the exploration of family's roots starts in a very simple way. Kamal and his wife Shamim pay a visit to India within a tourist group. On the next morning of their arrival, Kamal leaves Shamim in the hotel and takes a flight to the province of Gujarat, then to Verawal by taxi. Verawal is described as a "far flung *cornor* of Gujarat". For Kamal, this corner is of great significance because it is an "ancestral town", it is "a place of distant--and partial-- origins"(276). Verawal is the motherland of Shamsi community to which Kamal belongs. It is the town in which his great-grandfather Punja Devraj is said to have been born and lived. More importantly, Verawal "was where his father had last been heard from" (Ibid).

In Verawal, Kamal has to find the right person to ask him/her. It is Pyarai, a man among the few Shamsi families which has stayed in the town. Pyarai tells Kamal that his family Devraj is no longer in the town, and his father Amin Punja is a doctor who used to come "periodically from somewhere" (p.278) to take care of Verawal patients. But, Doctor Amin Punja Devraj, according to Pyarai, has "died five or so years ago", and people of Verawal have made after death Muslim religious services to him.

To have a sense of one's roots is to have a sense of his/her spirituality. On his return to Delhi, Kamal insists on the taxi driver to take him to the shrine of Sidi Sayyad, located in jungle. The shrine represents the spiritual inspiration for the Shamsi community, those who have a dream to achieve or a problem to settle come to the shrine seeking help and advice. Kamal stands before the shrine to explore the spiritual power that has inspired his great grandfather Punja to leave his country and people to Africa. Punja has originally come to Sidi Sayyad to get his help to make Sherbanoo's father accept Punja's proposal for his daughter. Indeed, Kamal imagines the critical moment that has driven his great grandfather to Africa, a moment that causes Kamal to be born to an African mother in Tanzania.

Although Kamal's visit to Gujarat has not taken a long time, it has lightened several aspects of his family story, aspects that remained obscure for decades. However, Kamal's presence in India represents the first stage of displacement in his efforts to explore his roots.

To explore one's roots is a long way with unexpected turnings. Not so long after his return to Canada, Kamal unexpectedly receives a call from his cousin Azim who tells Kamal that he needs to meet him for a medical consult. In this meeting, Azim tells Kamal that on the day of his engagement to Shamim, an African girl with *Khanga*, traditional African dress comes to Jaffu Uncle's shop, Azim's father, asking for Kamal. But, the uncle tells her that Kamal has left for study in Kampala, Uganda. The uncle gives the African girl some money to return to her village. When Azim describes the girl, it comes immediately to Kamal's mind that she is Saida from Kilwa. Definitely, there has been something extremely important that brings Saida to Dar es Salaam.

Saida is the girl with whom Kamal has a long association. Hamida, Kamal's mother and Bikulthum, Saida's mother are as close as two sisters. In school years, Kamal almost daily comes to help Saida in her study. One day, the mother decides to send her son Kamal to his uncle in Dar es Salaam, the capital of Tanzania. For the mother Hamida, it is the only way to have a chance for a second marriage.

For Kamal, his mother Hamida, his lover Saida, and his hometown Kilwa represent essential parts of his roots that are not sufficiently explored. Thus, Kamal decides to leave Canada into Africa where the second stage of his journey into the roots starts.

After thirty five years in Canada, Kamal returns to Tanzania seeking his roots in his mother Hamida and his

lover Saida. He meets a man at a tea shop. The man, called Lateef, offers his help to Kamal in searching for them.

Soon, Lateef arranges a meeting for Kamal with a very old lady called Fatuma. The latter is the younger sister of Bikulthum, Said's mother. When she meets Kamal, the old woman looks unhappy. Kamal begs her, "please help me...I beg of you...I have come a long way for her" (p.96). After a short silence, Kamal asks "where is Saida? What happened to her" (Ibid). Fatuma is persistent not to answer his questions, 'we don't know where she is, I tell you" (p. 97). In a country that suffers from acute shortage in doctors, "fifty doctors for a population of ten million..." (p. 16), Kamal uses his power as a doctor over an old woman riddled with cancer. His offer to treat Fatuma makes the second meeting between the two characters possible.

In the second meeting, Kamal decides to meet Fatuma alone. In this meeting, Fatuma looks less aggressive. She has to be so because she needs Kamal's help as a doctor. As for Kamal, he is increasingly satisfied that Fatuma is the right person to give him a way to Saida. But, it is not easy to go with Fatuma, as that could be realized with the following:

Fatuma: "...Now why are you looking for her [Saida]".

Kamal: "We were children together. We were friends. Our mothers were friends".

Fatuma: "So that is why you are looking for her. Because you played together".

Kamal: It's been a long time since I saw her. I want to meet her". (p. 209-210)

In this meeting, Fatuma decides to reveal a piece of information about Saida to make sure that the man, who desperately wants to see his girl, would come again to treat her:

Kamal: "And Saida? What happened to her?"

Fatuma: "She had a child".

Kamal: "Boy or girl?...Where is that child".

Fatuma: "Looks at my back...It hurts me". (p. 210).

Fatuma's speech on Saida's child takes Kamal by memory more than three decades ago. It reminds Kamal that, after he has finished his high school in Dar esSalaam, he pays a visit to Kilwa where he meets Saida twice in an isolated site on the coast. In the first meeting, Kamal is told that Saida has been forced to marry an old man called

AbdallaHamisi for earning living. In the second meeting, the intimacy between the two young lovers turns into sexual contact. On that day, Kamal makes a promise to Saida that he would come back to take her after finishing his university study. This revelation has worked strongly on Kamal.

The third meeting between the two characters, Kamal and Fatuma, is decisive and things become comprehensively clear. In this meeting, they start to understand the pains of each other. Kamal is helpful to the ailed old woman by money and treatment, she has to react positively. The mutual understanding of the other one's pain has contributed to establish a "communion" (226) between the two characters. This contributed to create what Vassanji says the "significant moment" (Ibid) in which Fatuma declares that her niece Saida and her child live in Minazi Minne. When asked about the location of that area, she promptly answers it is located "on the Lindi road" (Ibid). Indeed, Fatuma's statement has created a shift in Kamal's exploration efforts of his roots: Kamal's roots in Saida and his child take priority over his roots in his mother Hamida.

Again, the presence of Kamal Punja in Kilwa of Tanzania represents the second stage of his journey with displacement. However, this displacement is motivated by the desire to explore his ethnicity, a thing that is essentially required in the multicultural society of Canada.

Conclusion

The tendency to identify immigrants upon their ethnicity has turned multiculturalism into a displacing power. A great number of immigrants feel they are not represented within this system of identification. This feeling is taking these immigrants into a one way journey to the country of origin, that is what happened to Kamal Punja in *The Magic of Saida* by M. G. Vassanji.

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