

## Spatial Dislocation and Temporal Longing in M.G. Vassanji's *The Magic of Saida*

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**Abstract** In *The Magic of Saida* (2012), M.G. Vassanji's compelling diasporic story asks questions of the spatial displacement and temporal nostalgia of its half-Indian, half-African-Canadian protagonist, Dr. Kamal Punja, who returns after a self-imposed exile of 35 years to Kilwa, Tanzania, to investigate ghostly phenomena. The novel maps a tripartite spatial geography of Kilwa, Dar es Salaam and Edmonton, alongside three psychically charged temporal geographies, past, enchanted childhood, present, volatile postcolonial experience, and future, material success and emotional dislocatedness. Saida is a symbol of the intangible and unachievable homeland, a temporal figure of what Kamal gave up when he became worldly. This paper posits that using Homi K. Bhabha's notion of cultural liminality and Avtar Brah's idea of "homing desire", Vassanji reveals spatial dislocation in a state of perpetual temporal suspension, which is a condition where the diasporic subject is neither in the past nor the present. This temporal fragmentation is accentuated by the use of two narrators Kamal and Martin Kigoma, and history and personal memory are both built up at the same time without ever coming together into a coherent whole. The novel ultimately posits spatial return as possible, but not temporal return, which ultimately, like Saida, vanishes with a vengeance.

**Keywords:** Diaspora, the homing desire, postcolonial identity, memory, return narrative, cultural hybridity

M.G. Vassanji has a unique position in the field of diasporic literature. Vassanji was born in Nairobi, Kenya in 1950 to Indian parents who arrived in Kenya under the colonial indenture system, and spent his childhood in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, before migrating to Canada via the United States where he earned his PhD. Most of his novels deals with a triple displacement, from India to East Africa to North America, which instructs all aspects of his personal. In his novels, he does not just examine people who travel from one country to another, he explores what it means to be carrying more than one history, more than one place, more than one time in the same consciousness. *The Magic of Saida* (2012) is possibly the most sentimentally focused statement on this obsession. It is the story of Kamal Punja, a middle-aged doctor who is living a comfortable life in Edmonton, Canada, but has decided to put it all on the line, leaving his medical practice, his wife Shamim and his two children behind, to head back to Kilwa, a small coastal town in Tanzania, to find Saida, his childhood lover. The novel appears to be a love story. Underlyingly, it's a longing to recover time which is forever gone, and to reverse the loss of space which will not be regained.

Unlike the traditional novel, which starts at the beginning of Kamal's life, *The Kite* begins at the most stressful moment of Kamal's life. We meet him through the eyes of Martin Kigoma, an African publisher, who finds Kamal lying delirious in a hospital bed in the city of Dar es Salaam. Kamal has been drugged, possibly poisoned, and is only half-conscious. He speaks in bits, spanning more than forty years back to Kilwa and his mother Hamida and back to Saida. Here, Vassanji's structural decision is very important. The novel begins in the middle of collapse, a man in a space and a time that has consumed him and immediately states from its opening page that the past can never be recovered whole. The reader is put in a role of witness to the wreckage of memory, when it is denied and



then suddenly released. As a frame story, Kigoma does not really have to be a character; it is just a collection of snapshots of Kamal's life, trying to put them together. But even this putting together is incomplete, erratic, and contradictory. Its structure itself reflects the theme of the novel, broken, disjointed and haunted.

Kamal's life is a story of dislocations which have been compounding. His mother was African and his father was Indian, Dr Amin Punja, who came back to India before Kamal had clearly formed any conscious memory of him. He was seven when his father died and at the age of eleven sent to Dar es Salaam to be raised by his paternal uncle as an 'Indian'. This first displacement, which broke him away from his mother, from his African identity and especially from Saida, his lover, the granddaughter of the renowned Swahili poet Mzee Omari bin Tamim, his study companion and neighbour, this first displacement cut him away from everything. Years later, Kamal came back to Kilwa right before he was off to Uganda for university, and he and Saida had relations before she left, promising him that he would return for her. He failed to live up to that promise. Kamal and his friend Shamim came to Canada when Idi Amin seized power in Uganda. He became a doctor, he found a comfortable job, he had a family and he was quite successful as an immigrant. However, something in him would not stop. But the past, embodied in Saida, was never going away, and grew more powerful with every passing decade. When he decides to do it, give up everything and go back to Tanzania, it is not a rational decision. These are the explosive events that are the result of the suppression of flame for 35 years.

What is mapped out in the novel's geographical space is the emotional architecture of the novel. The places and times of Kilwa, Dar es Salaam and Edmonton are not just places, they are moments, states of being. Kilwa is Kamal's remembrance of his childhood, the time before he became technically Indian, when he was still African and Indian, sitting at Mzee Omari's feet and listening to him read poems about colonial resistance, running with Saida by the Indian Ocean. The first split is the city of Dar es Salaam, the city where he was educated to be an Indian, to deny his African identity and to consider himself a Mhindi, not a golo, a half-caste. Edmonton is the greatest and most full dislocation, the city of professional achievement and emotional emptiness, wherein Kamal constructed a life, but never a self. His son Hanif, who is now 11, was presented with an old family photo that also featured Kamal's African grandmother, and the child reacted with complete disdain, which was to his father's great embarrassment because he could not accept he had African blood. It shows in one scene, devastatingly, what Edmonton did to Kamal's family over one generation, made them strangers to their history. The journey back to Kilwa is not a tourists' trip or an indulgence of the old man. An endeavour to put together that which has been broken apart in three cities over three decades.

Saida is the centrepiece of the exploration of the longing for time in the novel. She is not so much a complete character in the story as what she is to Kamal, a past time and place which he could only have a fleeting glimpse of and cannot go back to. As a matter of fact, her grandfather, old poet Mzee Omari, was thought to be inspired by a genie in his work, and Saida has her own indefinable spirit of the other world. She is linked to the spiritual and profound roots of Africa, to its oral history, ancient memory, to all that Kamal abandoned when he decided to take the road of Indian identity and ultimately Canadian citizenship. His yearning for Saida is an inextricable part of his yearning for the African childhood he lost and the African identity he was taught to forget. Finally, when she shows up in his life, in the surreal, drug-fuelled vision near the end of the novel, it is not a reunion, but a reckoning. She's accusing him of abandoning her, failing to keep his promises, opting for an Indian woman instead of her. Her voice speaks after thirty-five years of nothing but silence, and it strikes him with a power that he is not prepared for in his Edmonton life. Vassanji does not specify whether this encounter is real or imagined. But what was not clear was its emotional authenticity: Kamal had left Saida behind and the past had not forgotten.

It is a point of great interest how time works in this novel. Time is not linear nor can it be retrieved by Vassanji. The novel skips all the way from Kamal's childhood in Kilwa, to his university days in Uganda, to his decades in Canada, and then to his current situation in Tanzania. These movements are not snapshots in time but at the same time exist in Kamal's mind, with no distinct demarcation between them, and they flow into each other. Kilwa is a



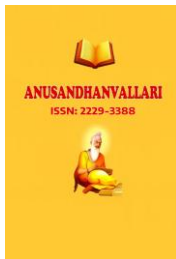
place where all traces of the colonial era abound, from the crumbling German buildings to the Maji resistance and the history of the East African slave trade that haunted his own family's veins. Vassanji writes as, Kilwa was all history; the past haunted from the ruins and graves. It is not a sentimentally nostalgic thing. It is the understanding that time in a place such as Kilwa is not linear but rather is a palimpsest, a place where one era is written over the other, but the other eras are not erased. The layers of time are traversed by Kamal as an insider and an outsider; one who was born here, but another who has moved away.

This temporal fragmentation is enacted at the level of form, as the novel is structured in a dual narrative, one mediated through the other by Kigoma's framing of Kamal's, whose voice this novel is in. As a publisher looking for African stories, Kigoma hears Kamal's story and attempts to make sense of it. The story he hears, however, is not a complete story, it is a story as he is already seeing it through Kamal's confused, guilty consciousness. Together with the reconstruction of history, the reconstruction of personal memory is attempted which does not converge into one authoritative version. Kamal's great-grandfather Punja Devraj was also instrumental in the resistance movement against the Germans in Africa and was hanged from the central mango tree in Kilwa's square. The supposed custodian of this history, the poet Mzee Omari, is revealed to have worked with the Germans, while writing poetry against them. Kamal's uncle was responsible for his sister Saida's arrival in Dar es Salaam with their baby brother, looking for Kamal. There is a duvet story behind each story in the novel. The past is not a literal reality that one can remember or forget, this is the key point of Vassanji's writing. It is never finished, never definite, never unchallengeable and always influenced by the needs and guilt and silences of those who experienced it.

Avtar Brah's 'homing desire' is a theoretical model that helps to explain the emotional rationale of Kamal's quest. Brah's key distinction between "home", as a mythic space of desire in the diasporic imagination and "home" as a geographical space, is of critical importance. The sense of pull towards home is not necessarily towards the actual place, but towards a time in a place, towards a certain way of being, of belonging, of being in relation, that is no longer there. Kamal stays away from Kilwa because of its roads or climate. He comes back to seek Kilwa, because Kilwa is the place where he could be the child of both Africa and India, the half-and-half which he was never allowed to be. It was not allowed to live that self. Subsequently it was superseded by an Indian 'self' in Dar es Salaam and then by a Canadian 'professional self' in Edmonton. His quest to return is motivated by the hope, which will never come, to be reunited with the man who once existed in that time. Saida has aged, turned sour and then entered into something more morbid than death. The ruins that led him at each step he takes in the walkways of Kilwa are not only historical monuments but physical counterparts of what time does to any manifestation of belonging.

The 'third space', the liminal space between cultures, identities and temporalities as theorized by Homi K. Bhabha is also crucial to understanding Kamal's situation. Kamal's identity has not been able to be contained in any one structure throughout his life. Too African to be accepted by his Indian family; too Indian to be accepted by the Africans who called him 'chotara'; too African to feel at home in Canada; too Canadian by the time of his return to Kilwa to be accepted there. He lives forever in the middle, in an 'inter' between races, between countries, between eras. This 'in-betweenness' is not felt liberating; it is felt as guilt and longing. To state the words of Homi K. Bhabha, "It is the in-between space that carries the burden of the meaning of culture, and by exploring this Third Space, we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of our selves". (The Location of Culture, 38)

He is a man who has lost all anchor in the world of identities available to him and his return to Tanzania is a last desperate attempt to find a place under his feet. Even this effort fails, even he is welcomed and even he suffers in Africa, even he is expected to be both welcome and destroying in Africa, this is the truest thing anything can say about the price of displacement. Collective and personal memory are also central issues of Vassanji's work. Kamal's quest for Saida is also a quest for the lost history of Kilwa, the unwritten, broken, and stifled history of



the lives of ordinary Africans and Asians during the days of German and British colonialism and in its troubled aftermath. He collected a private library in Edmonton for thirty-five years dealing with the history of Kilwa. Yet this thinking knowledge is not substantiated by any lived or felt reality until he comes back to the physical setting where the reality occurred. The historical becomes personal only when he walks the streets of Kilwa, meets its descendants and faces the ruins of a world that once sheltered him. This can be rightly justified in the words of Edward Said, "For an exile, habits of life, expression or activity in the new environment inevitably occur against the memory of these things in another environment. Thus, both the new and the old environments are vivid, actual, occurring together contrapuntally". (Reflections on Exile, 186)

The old poet Mzee Omari had spent his life working on an epic poem that he never completed, to document the colonial history of East Africa, but very little physical evidence of him remains. On one level, Kamal's journey back is his way of making up for what Mzee Omari failed to do, to witness, albeit late, a history that was disappearing. Writing fiction, on the other hand, is a process of "temporal recovery," says Vassanji, the ability to hold on to things that official history does not care to retain.

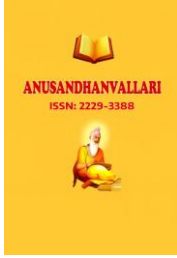
The novel's ending is uncompromising. Kamal manages to survive the horrific incident in the village of Minazi Minne, where he is drugged and seemingly meets the ancient Saida, who either is or isn't the old woman Bibi Ramzani, identified only by the blue sandals Kamal gave her. He is saved, comes back to Dar es Salaam and slowly starts to work out what truly happened to Saida, to their child and to the promise he made to deny him. He discovers something other than resolution, he finds confirmation of loss. After his leaving Saida's life was filled with melancholy, betrayal and later with a strange absence from the society of normal life. Kamal is unable to change something that is already done. It is something he can only carry. The novel ends with the question of whether we have any obligations to the past? It is not rhetorical, it is a silly question or it is a profound question: the past is over or we are part of a continuum. Vassanji is adamant that we are a continuum and that the debts we owe to our choices made in space and time don't just vanish after years have passed or oceans have been traversed.

A space of exile and an ache of time are ultimately one wound in the Magic of Saida. But when a person is compelled to abandon a location before he or she has fully occupied it, he or she isn't just losing a place, he or she is losing a way of life. They lose a part of their own selves that they could only have in that place, at that time, with those people. Kamal's thirty-five years in Canada are not a failure; rather, they are a life lived in Canada. They are constructed on silences, however, the silence of Saida, the silence of his African mother, the silence of his son's half-African identity. Then, when those silences come up to speak, the present can't hold them. There is no glorification of the past or a condemnation of the decision to emigrate in the novel. It tells us that the past is not something passive, it will bring us into the present and the ones who think they are safe, are the ones who will be the most vulnerable if the past comes back.

What Vassanji does beautifully in this novel is to make this awareness in the reader's heart rather than just in the mind. The physicality of Kilwa, the ancient ruins, the ocean, the mango trees, the multigenerational legacy of trade and slavery and rebellion, is the manifestation of Kamal's mind. The resting place of time is in its stones and in its soil, more than any Canadian city; and when Kamal walks through it, it is not a walk-through geography, but one through his own suppressed self. But that self cannot be recovered, it can only be recognized. And the painful recognition of this, the diasporic subject's only approach to being whole. In telling this story, Vassanji does the same for his readers, especially those who bear their own Kilwa within them; those lost spaces that nothing else can fill.

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