

The Colonial Diary as a Time Capsule in M.G. Vassanji's *The Book of Secrets*

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Abstract: The novel, *The Book of Secrets*, based on a single powerful object, the personal diary of Alfred Corbin, a British colonial administrator in East Africa in 1913, won the Giller Prize in 1994. The diary re-emerges one hundred and seventy-five years later in the hands of Pius Fernandes, a retired schoolteacher from Goa, who lives in the postcolonial city of Dar es Salaam and which becomes more than a historical record. It becomes a time capsule that makes the past and the present converge, forcing the living to account for what the dead failed to say. In this paper, as a researcher, will look at how Vassanji has used the diary as a creative tool to examine the connection between official documentation of colonialism and the missing narratives, that is, what is recorded is as interesting as what is not. The diary is Corbin's, but the real subject is the Shamsi Indian community, the traders, the spies, the women, the children, whose lives are caught up in his colonial gaze yet never fully grasped. The diary is no longer Corbin's possession as Fernandes reads, annotates and investigates, but becomes the community's recovered voice. The paper suggests that, following Paul Ricoeur's theory of narrative time, and Hayden White's 'historical emplotment', Vassanji has called the construction of colonial history as a kind of historical counter-memory.

Keywords: historical reconstruction, postcolonial counter-memory, Shamsi Community, narrative time, suppressed truth, material culture.

There is a time on each object. In the picture is a face of a man who died long ago. A letter is the expression of voice in a nonwriting hand. But a diary is not as easy as either, it is the mind of the person that wrote it, the things they left out, the blinding things, their assumptions. M.G. Vassanji is well acquainted with this. In *The Book of Secrets* (1994), he uses a colonial diary as a focus for his novel not merely as a convenient plot device, but as a philosophical problem. What to do with the documents of people who wielded power over people they did not know? Does any of this information seem to be accurate? Are they both useable for other purposes? So, what happens to the people whose lives were mentioned in part in that diary when they attempt to reconstruct what occurred decades later? In these questions lies the novel's impetus, and relevance where colonial history has left its traces.

The novel opens in 1988, in Dar es Salaam. Retired school teacher an Indian, Pius Fernandes, receives a diary from an old student. The diary was discovered in the back room of a store that was being liquidated, and a casualty of the gradual disappearance of East Africa's Asian commercial classes after independence. It was owned by Assistant District Commissioner Alfred Corbin of the British colonial government, who came to the imaginary borderland town of Kikono in what is now Kenya-Tanzania near the border in 1913 and recorded his final entry that year. The diary is very succinct and incomplete and very much the style of an officer who was more at ease in administrative matters than expressing himself. It contains Corbin's impressions of East Africa, his interactions with Indians who had run shops there, and his notes on African life, foremost of which is his developing interest in a young Indian girl named Mariamu. The diary is not used after 1913. The novel attempts and fails to completely answer the question of where it came from, how it got there, and why it was in the back room of a shop in 1988.



This is an intentional denial of full truth that is at the heart of what Vassanji is doing. He is not a story writer in the traditional sense, who would have all secrets of the story revealed at the end. He is working on a meditation on historical knowledge: what happened and what we know about what happened. Pius Fernandes turns into a narrator-historian: reading the diary, speaking to witnesses and descendants, travelling to the sites described in the diary and providing his own interpretations. Yet his restored history is not as accurate or complete as Corbin's original narrative. One of the characters says to him, 'You can't know everything about the past' This is not a 'comforting' statement. The novel's central and uneasy claim is that the past is untouchable; that the records we turn to recover it were made by people whose interests were themselves, and who had prejudices and omissions.

In order to appreciate the significance of the diary for Vassanji, it is vital to understand what a colonial diary was and was not. To this Ranajit Guha says, "To read for the silences is to read against the grain of colonial documents, to recover what was never meant to be recorded" (Subaltern Studies, 45). In the formal colonial administrative system, officials, such as Corbin, maintained official reports, district notebooks, and correspondence. But in theory, a personal diary was an intimate space, unpretentious and unguarded, more private than any official document. However, Corbin's ideas and imagination of the world were shaped by assumptions he held about race, authority and the civilising mission that were rooted in colonialism. He was not going to mess up the lives of the Shamsi people. He could not see them fully, however, because his view was of what he could see from the horizon line of a colonial officer. When he speaks of Mariamu he speaks in the terms of the colonial male fantasy, exotic, mysterious, beautiful, unknowable. He cannot read her like a flesh-and-blood person, with an inner life, a mind, desires. The diary does not tell the truth of the experience of Mariamu, but the truth of the experience of Corbin.

The novel's most striking portrayal of the failure of colonial documentation is through the personality of Mariamu. She comes from the Shamsi Muslim community and is an orphan niece of the town's religious leader. She works for Corbin in his home, and maybe he's sleeping with her, this is never proven. Then she is married off to Pipa, an average shopkeeper, and on their wedding night, Pipa discovers that she is not a virgin. He exposes her in front of everyone for sleeping with Corbin. She says nothing. This silence in the novel is remarkable, the silence of resistance to a world where her voice was not heard and respected fully. Mariamu suffers for years only to be raped and killed in the turmoil of the First World War in East Africa. Her son Ali is born with fair skin and grey eyes and doesn't even know who his father is. In fact, Pipa lives for the rest of his life believing the diary will have the answers to these questions, he guards it, keeps it in a special room and turns the memory of Mariamu into something almost akin to a private religion.

Here the diary's role is more than just a record of history. It becomes sacred to Pipa, a thing which somehow contains the spirit of the Mariamu. He can't read it because he is not literate but he keeps it in the mementoes of Mariamu and visits it as if he visited a shrine. If he could read it, then he would know what his wife had been doing and thus, what he had been doing. It is one of the most incisive ironies of Vassanji's writing, the very document that killed Mariamu is the means by which her grieving husband attempts to find her again. The diary is both a weapon of the colonizer and a vessel of the colonized people who are yearning to belong. The diary is both weapon of the colonizer and a vessel of the yearning-to-belong colonized people. Vassanji neither tries to solve this paradox nor does he attempt to do so; in fact, resolving it is impossible. Objects can carry multiple meanings that can be built up by the people using them and that can be very different from the intentions of the objects' makers.

This is a layered history that comes with the diary when it is given to Fernandes in 1988. As he explores the mysteries of a new world, he learns about his own history, too. He comes to Kikono which is almost empty, its past life spread all over the world. He speaks with individuals who recall Pipa, Mariamu and colonial days. He reads letters, restores timelines and provides tentative interpretations. Each response he receives raises more questions, however. What was Ali's father's name? Is Corbin genuinely interested in getting to know Mariamu or was he using her to exploit his position of power? Did Mariamu steal the diary from Corbin or did Corbin give it



to her? Did Mariamu's silence cover up her own ears or did she not have the strength to speak? Fernandes can't answer these questions for sure, and he's honest enough to say as much.

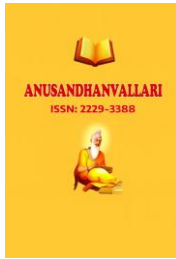
What sets the novel above history fiction is this epistemic modesty, which denies knowledge he is not possessed of. Hayden White maintained that all history is fiction, a selection of events, an ordering of them, a construction of a story from them. As he comments as, "The historian arranges the events in the chronicle into a hierarchy of significance by assigning events the status of inaugural, transitional, or terminal motifs of the storyline" (Meta history: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe, 7) It is taken seriously by Vassanji's novel where the act of historical narration itself is the subject. Fernandes' reconstruction of the past is clearly a reconstruction, and the reader is told when he is making an assumption, when he is out of the evidence, when he is relying on a story someone may have told incorrectly. It is a story that doesn't allow itself to be told in a conventional way, pretending to be historical and having no hesitation in knowing the truth. Rather, Vassanji presents us with a murky past, like all pasts when they are known from the inside.

It is helpful to use here the idea of 'narrative time' as developed by Paul Ricoeur. Time, therefore, is not a human time until it is put into words, Ricoeur said, because narratives "select, arrange and interpret" rather than simply record. The diary was built in one historic time (1913) and is read and remounted again in another (1988) in *The Book of Secrets*. The period of time between those two moments is not only a measure of time but rather a measure of the dramatic changes which East Africa experienced in the 75 years in between, the first World War, transfer of German territories to British rule, independence, Africanisation and the withdrawal of the Asian communities. None of this is recorded in the diary because it could not; it is a diary written before these events. However, Fernandes interprets it in the context of all that has come after, and it has a different significance for him than it did for Corbin. Opens the time capsule in an environment the creator would never have guessed.

Spatial aspects are also significant in the novel. Located in what was at the time called the borderland, between British East Africa and German East Africa, this fictional border town Kikono was ruled by an ADC whose jurisdiction extended into a grey area. Here are the novel's major ambiguities that flourish, Ali's uncertain paternity, the undefined nature of the relationship between Corbin and Mariamu, Pipa's double loyalty as he is manipulated to spy for both the British and the Germans. In the border town, different systems of power meet each other, but never become clear; the colonial diary, recorded there, at that crossing, captures this irresolution. Decades later, when Fernandes visits Kikono, the town is nearly deserted, its residents spread throughout the world. The physical environment has been emptied of life, but the diary still has some of them.

Vassanji is also mindful of the work of colonial documents as politicians, as well as historians. Corbin's diary entries are short, factual, platitudinous, and devoid of emotion, typical of one who has been taught over time to observe efficiently and report concisely. Yet it is this very restraint that is also a manifestation of power, Corbin is the rational, calm, objective 'onlooker' and the community he sketches in as the other, the exotic, the unpredictable, the unknowable. It is not just a description; it's a way of talking about her that both celebrates her worthiness and binds her to the colonial category of vagrant. This double move, the recognition of the humanity of the colonised and the perpetuation of the hierarchy that allows for colonisation, is always made by the language of colonial administration. In 1988, a time when Fernandes was reading this language, they know this is a rhetoric. It is not 'take it on faith' for him, but it is the only contemporary record available and so it is what he has to work with, it is a matter of reading against the grain, finding what the official voice will not say.

Corbin can't tell anyone, most importantly, the truth about Mariamu. He can't tell if he broke her or genuinely loved her, if he knew or didn't know that Ali was his, if he had regrets for the loss of her life or if he just continued on to his next assignment and forgot about her. The diary refuses to give it to us, either by reticence or the limitations of the genre, or simply out of Corbin's own protective silence. It is this withholding that makes the diary so effective as a storytelling technique. The colonial record reveals the coloniser's world and virtually only



the colonised subject's exterior life. Now, as absence, a figure that is always seen through other people's eyes, never allowed to tell her own truth, Mariamu inhabits the novel. Her silence, which Vassanji does not attempt to end at the end of the novel, is the way he respects her lack of self-representation.

The story ends ambiguously. Fernandes is not aware of who fathered Ali. He does not find out exactly what Corbin and Mariamu are doing together. Finally, he concedes that 'We can only know the past in an incomplete way, and we know it that way'. It is not giving way but wisdom to accept. It is the understanding that historical recovery is different from historical truth, and the faithful historian or novelist which must recognize the difference. This lack of documentation does not just present an academic challenge for those communities whose lives are only partially recorded in colonial sources. It is the constant state of understanding of themselves; they have to read themselves into documents never meant to speak for them and make themselves peripheral in histories never intended to include them.

Vassanji's success in *The Book of Secrets* is both to depict this condition with accuracy and with a sense of feeling, allowing it to be both an observation of East African history and one of the natures of historical knowledge. The colonial diary is not just a bad man, and it is not just a good man. It is an object with time in it, time of its making and all the time that making did not take. Opening it, as Fernandes opens it, involves not only remembering the past, but also the process of remembering it, of determining what to remember, who to give voice to, who to silence. *The Book of Secrets* is, in this sense, a novel of the kind of literature that is able to keep competing truths alive, able to bring a story to a halt before its conclusion, and able to see that the lives of ordinary people in extraordinary circumstances should be recovered and that such recovery need not be complete.

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