

Anthropological Tensions Confronting Immigrants in M.G. Vassanji's Amriika

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Abstract:- Vassanji described the anthropological or sociological tensions faced by the immigrants in his novels structured traditionally towards hoping a positive future in North America. He described this frequently in his novels - *No New Land* and the ambitions *Amriika*. *Amriika* for instance states the period of struggling faced by an idealistic young African who in 1968 leaves home to attend an American college. *Amriika*, for example shows the three decades in American history when there were riots, angry demonstration of mob, uproar or din-conflict of emotions etc., a period of spiritual quests, anti-war protests sexual openness and radicalized politics

Ameriika iterates from the view point of an immigrant belonging to the Third World. The immigrant enters to the world's richest nation as a student Ramji is from a small group of Cutchi Ismaili Muslims set in Dar es Salaam. Whose parents expired and hence he was brought up by his grandmother. Ramji reaches to United States in the year 1960's. This was a period of protests. He is soon surrounded and completely covered by the politics specially the anti-war movement.

Key Words: M.G. Vassanji, Amriika, Immigrants, different cultures, identity, homeland, conflicts.

1. INTRODUCTION

Vassanji in his 1999 novel *Amriika* again started writing about the themes and the topic of immigration. Here in this novel the protagonist Ramji, is Asian- African who moves from Dar-es-Salaam, Tanzania towards Cambridge, Massachusetts, like Vassanji himself. Ramji is unintentionally held - up and was submerged utterly by 1960's political activities and fundamental outbreaks in the college. I have observed that Vassanji talks about marginalized people.

All writers do, whether the people in question be a family of Jews in New York or a farming community in Saskatchewan. (The Canadian Encyclopaedia)

A writer whose works which tend to evoke feeling are distinguished by luxurious subtleties and a lightness of touch Vassanji uses stilted dialogue and a heavy-handed characterization.

The novel *Amriika* is concerned with the theme of disloyalty, cheating, discovery set in three highly charged decades in America in the history of the nation and disillusionment. It is a story of Ramji, a student from Dar-es-

Salaam, East Africa in late sixties arrives in America which was very much different from what he thought about, a person inclined towards spiritual quests, anti-war demonstrations and changing life style. Ramji is swept up in events whose consequences will haunt him for years to come, as he finds himself in the tumult of the troubled times.

"The disciple has sinned, may those present forgive, may the Lord forgive..."

Kneeling, leaning forward in urgent supplication, hands joined before him, the sinner repeated the formula three times; the mukhi, his friend Sona, met his look eye to solemn eye, heard him out, said three times, "The Lord forgives," then dipped two fingers in a bowl of water and sprinkled it on the sinner.

Everybody underwent this monthly purification, stepping up to and kneeling before the mukhi, one by one; finally Sona too knelt, before a member of the congregation designated as deputy for the occasion, and asked forgiveness. This was the last ceremony of the Friday closest to the new moon. The prerequisite for forgiveness was repentance.

(M.G.Vassanji's *Ameriika*, Page 47, Mc Celland & Stewart Inc. The Canadian Publishers 1999, ISBN 0-7710-8723-3)

After a few decades we find a changed America and Ramji is passionately in love and is in a set of situation which portrays a terrifying experience and nostalgia of his past and his unanswered questions.

A novel of eternal quest for home, and personal and political awakening told from the perspective of a person belonging to Dar-es-Salaam, East Africa it is a quintessential North American novel.

Ramji a student arrives in America in 1968 and sees that it was very different to that of what he thought about in his dreams. It was held up in spiritual quests, anti-war demonstrations and changing lifestyles. When eventually he grows, he finds that he is in a state swayed by the uproar current and he is swept towards a world of drifting values and sexual freedom, of protest bombings, peace rallies, and religious conflicts.

It was a Friday night, a little past sunset, and Kendall as usual at this hour was deserted and forbidding. There was no witness to the explosion when it occurred, save one homeless soul. Out at the front end of campus, though, Mass Ave was festive, a rock band had just wound up its performance on the green outside the Student Center. It was here on Mass Ave that, in typical overkill, five fire engines and six police cars appeared in a jangle of sirens, drawn by garbled warning phone call and the presence of student crowds. The mistake was realized and the fire engines began a hasty departure, when one of them backed into a police car. Flashing blue and red lights and the heavy breathing of automobile engines as from overgrown beasts added to the bizarreness of the scene.

(M.G.Vassanji's *Ameriika*, Page 143, Mc Celland & Stewart Inc. The Canadian Publishers 1999, ISBN 0-7710-8723-3)

After a long time, with his marriage and living an unsteadily life in a changed America, he meets a young woman from Zanzibar, and feels that he can lead a better, genuine life – until in their midst arrives a mysterious visitor from Ramji's past.

Vassanji had depicted America as one of the changed country in the nation's three decades. Vassanji has produced a dynamic and large string of characters, including Darcy, who twice changes the course of Ramji's life, an infamous left wing journalist and icon back home in Dar-es-Salaam, Sonu, researcher of the past and an obsessive scholar, attracting, Rumina, one who promises for a new start but might not be what she seems to be, Lucy-Anne Miller, whose commitment to the reasons of the day leaves Ramji with questions that will trouble him in the future course of life was a fiery radical of the 1960's.

In the novel *Amriika* some questions were posed as, how far can radical dissent and political commitment go? How far west can you go?

Starting from Boston- Cambridge during the Vietnam War era, in Canada this novel portrays journeys of an immigrant, in India it was seen as an imitation of 9/11 incident. The reader reaches to conclusion that "*Amriika*" is how America is pronounced by the Indians.

Since the colonial times there have been a lot of controversies over immigrants. There a limitless effect that the United States has on the immigrants. The three main subjects that rule the controversies are the economic, fiscal and demographic effects. One can conclude that immigration is good but should be limited based on both the good and bad effects that immigration has on the economical, fiscal and demographic sides of the United States.

One topic that is mostly talked about among the nation is the effect of immigration on the economy. It

comprises of both the positive as well as the good and bad effects that cancel each other out. Most of the people say that the profit to the economy is brought by immigration. James Smith explains that how the immigration increase the economy, and at the same time have negative effects for some people.

Immigrants help produce new goods and services and increase the supply of labour at the most basic level. Domestic workers as a group gain since they are paid a sufficient amount as compared to the value of the new services and goods.

The effect that immigration has on the domestic workers is that they produce more productively, specializing in producing goods at which they are skilled, on the production side.

Gain can also be yielded by specializing in consumption. There may be losers as well as among different group of United States residents even when the economy as a whole gains, there may be losers as well as gainers.

Some say the effect is very small although the United States economy is benefited with the growing number of increase in the immigrants. In the opinion of David Largesse, a recent study says :

Immigrants help keep the prices lower contributing as much as \$10 billion in the economic growth each year, but the effect is small on a United States economy that produces nearly \$8 trillion.(The Immigration Debate)

The poverty rate of the United States an issue that has been debated upon is negatively affected by immigration. Peter Brimelow states that –

Because a large number of immigrants are relatively unskilled, their poverty rate is significantly higher at 18 per cent compared to the 12.1 per cent poverty rate for the native born. (Immigrant Children)

In the growth of the economy a large role has been played by the immigrant workers. Within the last few years there has been a debate involving immigrants and the computer industry. It is felt by many companies' still lack skilled people in the United States to fulfill the need for computer programmers. They indeed sate that Americans are not given opportunity to work in these position by these companies and are unwilling to retain older programmers. They look for foreigners to fill these demands, and want trained people with latest computer skills.

Roy Beck states that – "companies like to be able to scout the world for somebody who can step right in and do the job."(The Immigration Debate) American programmers many times lack in specific skills which are required for a new task. Beck also states that even for other business, the

immigrant workers are considered as they are the people who work in worst working conditions for less money.

In regions of high concentrations immigrants are paid low. Poorly skilled immigrants are the state and local tax payers. They pay more on average to maintain the public services that are used by the immigrants. The immigration of workers has a negative as well as a positive effect also.

Immigration has many types of benefits. Immigrations are very entrepreneurial. Their rate of self-employment and business start-ups are very high than the United States born citizens. Particularly in high technology industries, the contribution made by immigrants towards the US corporate is tremendous and is of global level.

United States needs talents, energies that serve as an engine for economic growth and progress is the most important benefit which the immigrants offer towards the United States.

The present scenario's debate over immigration is between the benefits and limitations of immigration workers. It is very clear that both sides have positive and negative points.

The fiscal effects on the United States are another aspect of immigration which is debated upon. According to Smith, the difference between the money paid by the government services for that household help and taxes form household immigrants account for the fiscal result of immigration. At each level the fiscal impact differs. Generally the fiscal impact is good at federal level, and bad at state level. Some states experience fiscal burdens form immigrants as the few states that receive majority of immigrants are the ones who are concentrated with the bad effects of immigration. The fiscal impacts of immigrant households also take into account the age of the children of the immigrants. "The current fiscal impacts estimated for immigrant-headed households are biased towards negative numbers because the households headed by immigrants include the native-born school age children of immigrants who incur high cost of public education, but they do not include the native born children of immigrants who have a positive fiscal impact."

The United States is affected by many points such as education and age of arrival to the long-term fiscal contribution that immigrants make. Because the immigrants have higher levels of education with high incomes they pay more taxes in long term. Immigrants who are age 50 or more and who do not have high school education receive more benefits than they pay taxes.

It is hard to classify that the fiscal impact of immigration are good or bad which are dependent on several different factors.

Another major point which has been debated over immigration is the Demographics of the United States. The population and comparative study of different cultures within each city increases due to the immigration to the United States. Major controversies are caused within these cities. In the present scenario we can see that more and more immigrants are starting to settle and are taking some towns by surprise. Some are happy with the entrance of a new community and culture into their area and also greet them with open arms. On the other hand, others feel sad and fight the sudden intrusion in population and for the different cultures within their areas. The need for bilingual policeman, teachers and general servicemen has increased because of the drastic change in population within the area.

It is considered as a progressive step towards breaking down the lines between race customs and nations, while some also consider it as a threat.

Considering the good and bad effects results immigration has on the economy, financial and demographic position of the United States, we can see that limited immigration has positive effects. The good and the bad consequences that immigration as a whole and workers has on the economy is a striking contrast. The United States financial position is influenced by many factors, considering the details like age, causing the federal fiscal system is good, on the other hand the state level is generally negative. One cannot determine whether immigration has positive or negative effects on the United States.

Some people feel a sense of togetherness while others feel threatened because of the rise in population resulting from immigration which causes a positive and a negative problem in the United States.

Without immigration the United States would not be what it is today at present. Every action in life has both negative and positive effects but they can turn out to be positive if they are regulated and controlled. Immigration if only it is regulated a little can result in a progressive better future.

M.G. Vassanji is a self-conscious person, who does not behave or look like a well renounced writer. He took training at MIT, and to write full time he gave up teaching. He and his wife live in Toronto, where Nurjehan, his wife runs a printing house which deals with the South Asian writing in Canada. The best first novel commonwealth Award for the African region won by him was for *The Gunny Sack* (1989). *The Gunny Sack*, praised for its combination of fiction and history it was a story of a small group of people of African Asians, who were known as Shamsis by Vassanji. This group was corresponding to the Ismailis, who considered "Aga Khan as the 10th avatar of Vishnu." (The Hindu)

A collection of interrelated short stories in *Uhuru Street* in 1992, reminding of Naipaul's *Miguel Street*, Vassanji

went in Dar-es-Salaam back to the lives of Cutchi settlers. Vassanji has used the old material, but with an innovative twist in his latest novel *Amriika*.

Prior to talking about the aspect of the twist, I must state that one of the interesting extra-literary aspects of this book is that it was also published in India simultaneously.

Just after it was found in the Heinemann International Writers series, Vassanji's novel (*The Gunny Sack*) was published by Viking, Penguin Books India. In the same way *Amriika* also appears in an Indian reprint which was printed in previous year by Mc Clelland and Stewarts, Canada's bestseller publishers. This point is worth noticing as we see that it is reversing the common trend of Indian in search for foreign markets. Here we can see a writer who is from the Indian origin seeks to write about the homeland and not just to the empire. Primarily the main motive cannot be economic.

The income from the market in India must be ignored, so other trade-offs must be there. It would be an entire cut off if Vassanji does not mention about his homeland. This is the main reason of Vassanji's attraction towards India as it is a part of his homeland.

Vassanji lives in United States but even there he remains marginalized. Canada does not give much importance to the calibre of the works of Vassanji hence his name as of a South Asian writer is difficult to remove. The multi-culturism provides for founding and providing grants for book writing places Vassanji is on a lower rank. While on the other hand in India a writer like Vassanji would have been considered much more seriously and would have got a massive opportunity to be read.

It is thus quite clear that the novel "*Amriika*" shows us the hard to understand nature of the Diaspora. It should narrate about the new land and his homeland. As we can see here Vassanji bridges between the two by narrating about his old Indian home in East Africa.

Vassanji's longing for the past is shown in the Tanga painting which he gifts to his host family which tells us about the history, "Wayfarer, Look back". (Post-Colonial Literatures) It is what Vassanji has done and still continues to reflect back on his memory.

Ameriika iterates from the view point of an immigrant belonging to the Third World. The immigrant enters to the world's richest nation as a student Ramji is from a small group of Cutchi Ismaili Muslims set in Dar es Salaam. Whose parents expired and hence he was brought up by his grandmother. Ramji reaches to United States in the year 1960's. This was a period of protests. He is soon surrounded and completely covered by the politics specially the anti-war movement.

The novel is often found to be repetitive. It also has dual movement. This novel combines two plot lines. The main one is political and on the other hand is the personal one. The repetition can be seen as Ramji witnesses similar experiences both on the personal and political grounds in both the parts of this novel. The former part of the novel witnesses two terminal events that is political and the other is personal.

Ramji is implicated for a bomb blast, and he knows who is behind all this, still Ramji provides shelter to his friends who are responsible for the blast. A woman who is Ramji's friend is sent to jail, who in turn thinks that it is Ramji who has betrayed her. On the contrary we find that Ramji falls in love with this woman which ultimately results in breaking of the marriage.

"But what do you think of women covering their heads in modesty?" she asked. "Ramji thinks the hijab adds to a woman's beauty," Rumina said, teasing him. "Is that how she snared you?" the girl asked him vampishly.

"Yes, I would say so," he said, and stopped there, unwilling to be drawn into further discussion on the desirability of the headdress. But he had his opinions, which she divined; and so she gave him a piece of her mind, which she'd obviously been itching to do.

"Nobody tells me to wear hijab-it's my wish. It's my Islamic identity. I follow the injunctions of the Quran for modesty-they are quite clear-and I make a political statement as well."

(M.G.Vassanji's *Ameriika*, Page 300,301, Mc Celland & Stewart Inc. The Canadian Publishers 1999, ISBN 0-7710-8723-3)

The next part starts with a sudden great disaster. Ramji has moved to West California to join a magazine. Here he again provides shelter to who was involved in a bombing act. There has been a death in this bombing. The man wants to flee the country, he is on run. Ramji's wife believes that, the person is innocent and she feels very sympathetic to the young man. A subtle rift is created between them because of this Ramji is jealous also. In the end, when the young man is holding Rumina hostage, the police enters to get him. Ramji's wife is very sad, broken and leaves home. The novel does not conclude on the ray of reconciliation, Ramji for the second time loses his love.

At the beginning the interesting twist that I mentioned is related with the politic of the novel. "The championing of radical causes ends up being a critique and at the same time a rejection of them." Close and uncomfortable scrutiny is done of both the Islamic fundamentalism of the 1990's and anti-war protests the 1960's. Both of these are seen as destructive, faded and explosive principles which ultimately result in death and violence.

Still life, post-destruction: a snapshot of a dwelling above a bombed-out bookstore in the Midwest, in ruins, portions collapsed, contents flung about, a gash in the far wall, shafts of day-light from outside; the vantage point is probably from a corner still supported. In the midst of the debris, the upper portion of a woman's body, the dress olive green, the hair golden, a hyphen of red lipstick on a smudged pink doll's face; the rest of her body could be under the broken masonry but isn't, I know; it's been blown off by a bomb. Also dead, her husband and child, nowhere in this picture.

The question arises again and again: How did a person like me get involved-however obliquely – with a horror such as this?

(M.G.Vassanji's *Ameriika*, Page 256, Mc Clland & Stewart Inc. The Canadian Publishers 1999, ISBN 0-7710-8723-3)

By both, the youth are led astray. Vassanji seems to give a decision against the extremism of all kinds and political adventurism. The book ends up rejecting instead of supporting liberal causes. We are left with a statist text, very deeply conservative which favours respect for authority as well as the rule of law. In comparison to the changing system, the dominant and even imperialist's customs of the United States is shown in a brighter light. I would say the book fails in the judgment of political movements and causes, although it certainly has some points of a political suspense in it.

Among the Indians he knew, Basu explained, there was always a competition, friendly and sometimes not so friendly, measured by the professional achievements of their children. A doctor or a lawyer counted high. There was a story about the "tragedy" of for myself. There are raw spots now, exposed in the heart.

(M.G.Vassanji's *Ameriika*, Page 389,390, Mc Clland & Stewart Inc. The Canadian Publishers 1999, ISBN 0-7710-8723-3)

Ramji's personal journey his suffering and loneliness, his relationship failures all are heading forward, but not convincingly. The protagonist in Vassanji's novel seems to be self-absorbed; self-centered his narration too narcissistic and self-indulging. Nor though his wife, or any other character emerges out of his shadows. Though Ramji appears to be modeled so intimately on Vassanji does not come in contact to an attractive character. He is a little devious, passive, shy, introverted, selfish ineffectual and calculating. His honesty in contradicting all the former qualities in himself helps redeem him.

Do you think the novel *Amriika*, lives up to the title? Is it a bright, even insightful depiction of a young country, which takes the pride itself on being the safeguard of humanitarian society? I would say that Vassanji's basic

promise that the novel seems to hold out is not very well delivered. America full of wish-fulfilling stereotypes is Vassanji's America. Also the sub-culture of the Shamsi Community is confined in Vassanji's novel most of the time.

The attempts at adding local colour and the historical detail do not match central to the novel. The setting of the novel is in America. The original spirit is missing the real "feel" of the place is not there. The following points have not been fully utilized such as the possibilities of description, the cultural gaps and conflicts and analysis. *Amriika* is a well told story, but I would not call it as his really good outstanding novel. It is a readable book.

The double migration of South Asian characters is depicted by Vassanji a Diaspora Canadian writer. Vassanji's characters are mostly Indian Muslims of the esoteric "Ismail" faith, working as semi-skilled labourers, junior colonial functionaries and small traders, who made their initial journey to East Africa in the nineteenth century within the British Empire, as a part of the labour mobility.

In the 1960's and 1970's from post-Independence Africa towards Europe and North America began the second immigration. Vassanji has given voice to a Canadian experience that did not find way into public awareness and literature, by narrating the story of Shamsi community.

Vassanji then throws light onto the other category of Diaspora who inhabits a limited place which states their circumstances of migration. The effect of colonialism and multiculturalism, community values, individual identity and history are the larger themes he deals with. In East Africa Vassanji has very popularly been called as a vocal representative of the Asian African community and one of the finest young African writers.

By his narration Vassanji acquaints us with the pre-colonial and post colonial Africa, which involves experience of many individuals which help him to weave the plot. G.C.K. Gwassa, John Iliffe's collaborative edition records of Maji-Maji rising in 1967 and Modern history of Tanganyika help Vassanji to know about the family history of Asians.

Vassanji very aptly says that if one does not write about himself one should consider himself as dead and buried and hence nobody would ever come to know about one's existence if we do not leave traces of memories for our future generations.

Most of the novels by Vassanji are full of elaborate and detailed description of the African life which was not dealt with a few decades back. By reading his novels one finds the African identity which was lost in the vague darkness. This self-discovery also helps Indians to re-discover their cultural roots of the past. Vassanji has made use of African words with that of English.

Identity, culture and postmodern world (1966) in the book by Madan Sarup points out that every identity has a history. Hence this justifies that why the postcolonial writers link the communal, political, social, personal and national histories of the people belonging to their homeland with their respective works, novels and articles.

Vassanji's characters often take up an in between space, they keep moving like a pendulum between the different cultures with that of African and Asian. This in between spaces provides the new ground for establishing the various strategies of selfhood; they bring to light the sings of innovation and identity in a nexus with the society. It thereby removes and replaces certain domain of differences and sometimes overlaps with the experience of nationhood, community, cultural interest and values.

It is noticed that when two cultural sects meet there is a struggle in quest to find one's own identity and so one has to possess a distinguishing identity. Vassanji through his novels has portrayed an innovative style of culture which is formed by the combination of different cultures and communities. His work's represent the changing cultures of East Africa and Asia.

Throughout history people have migrated to other lands which present its own special characteristic. Immigrants have faced and are still facing extreme conditions which has increased their stress level thus it often results in the failure of human capacity to adapt to these new circumstances.

Such immigrants are more prone to "immigrant syndrome with chronic and multiple stress known as Ulysses syndrome." (Ulysses Syndrome) This is named so as a Greek hero by this name faced many danger and mishaps when he was in another land which was far from his loved near and dear ones.

We can see this syndrome emerging in our society and has become a topic of main importance concerning the physical and mental health of a person. The presence of this syndrome still haunts our modernized global world in which a large majority of immigrant lives have been damaged in a devastating way.

CONCLUSIONS

The immigrant syndrome with chronic multiple stress is characterized in two way. Firstly an individual suffers from some stressors and secondly he shows a series of symptoms from areas of psychopathology. The main stressors are:-

Firstly separation and loneliness this is when the immigrants leave behind their loved ones like young children, spouse.

Secondly, the feeling of failure and lack of hope, this in when the immigrant is unable to get even the minimum requirements of a life despite he has invested economically and emotionally.

Thirdly the immigrant has to merely fight in order to survive as it is with great difficulty that he manages to get food and a roof to sleep under.

Fourthly, the fear and the physical dangers which the immigrant have to face in order to reach to the other land. This is so because such sort of immigration is often organized by mafia and other such groups who obtain by force or threat

Psychological fear is more destructing them physical fear because it becomes very difficult for the mind to overcome this fear and there are very less ways of escaping and getting rid of this fear.

"Where did they go? The destination country plays an important role because it affects the economic well-being of the migrants and the activities in which they engage: skilled versus non-skilled labor; tradable versus non-tradable sectors; economic sectors that are "sunrise" industries versus mature industries, etc. The more economically successful a Diaspora is, the greater its effects on the country of origin-and these effects are amplified by the global salience of the destination country. Controlling for other characteristics, ethnic lobbying on foreign policy has a greater potential payoff if the host country is the United States than if it is New Zealand. Moreover, the destination country's political regime can also have significant effects. Migrants to countries with authoritarian regimes are more likely to be temporary compared to those who move to countries with democratic regimes, and length of stay, in turn, affects migrant behaviour. Furthermore, in democratic countries the country of origin. Indeed, the possibility of emulation by diasporas means that over time, they tend to learn about the political practices, such as forms of political participation and organization, in the destination and the content of what is learned-and the larger the likely effects on the country of origin."

(Diaspora, development and democracy –the domestic impact of international migration: page 245. Devesh Kapur Oxford Publication 2010)

Immigrants live with the fear that at any movement of the time the immigrants would be expelled from this foreign country. So this way loneliness, inability to achieve one's objectives, facing the extreme conditions of life, poverty, terror, psychological and physical fear form the basis of the "Ulysses syndrome – Immigrant syndrome with chronic and multiple stress." (Ulysses Syndrome)

Thus the immigrants have to face many hardships in terms of language, region, employment, culture and

environment. Along with these he even has to face the changing political upheavals. Even the health department does not treat these immigrants properly out of some prejudice, racism so these patients are not diagnosed in an apt way and are being treated as depressive and are subject to a series of useless tests. This results in costly treatment even though they are not infected by those infections.

Vassanji has justified the treatment immigrants face through his novels, highlighting the problems they face in their day to day life, as seen in this novel *Amriika* where Ramji is pulled by the tumultuous changing values, religions and political protests.

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BIOGRAPHIES



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