

**(BE)LONGING AND LOSS:
EXPLORING VASSANJI'S NOSTALGIA**

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Abstract

M. G. Vassanji's latest novel – Nostalgia (2016) explores the dilemmas of identity and (be)longing - expressed or suppressed, realised or hidden, imposed or experienced - that have constituted the heart of diasporic writing. This paper explores the novel as a narrative that seems to move away from the genre, only to, before its close, arrive unexpectedly, at its centre, to focus attention on the unresolved and nagging concerns that serve for the diasporic as an albatross, that s/he is bound eternally to carry, whether at the physical or the psychological level.

Keywords: Nostalgia, Vassanji, diaspora, identity, (be)longing

*– But now I have this strange feeling that I myself don't belong ...
The world is not mine anymore.
(Vassanji, 2016: 206)*

Labelled variously as speculative fiction, allegory and magical realism, Vassanji's *Nostalgia*, for the discerning reader, becomes a narrative that, subtly yet powerfully, touches upon the essential concerns that lie at the heart of diasporic writing. Not easily available, in most parts of the world, having been released only in Canada, this work of fiction has been dismissed by many Canadian readers and reviewers, who have failed to notice the powerful and obvious, yet scattered hints that place it firmly in the genre of postcolonial diasporic writing.

Set in 2023, *Nostalgia* is a novel that has majorly deviated from Vassanji's writing style which, in all his earlier books of fiction and nonfiction, has been simple and one which focusses on obvious geographical (dis)placement, across national boundaries. In this book, for the most part, the reader remains oblivious to what Vassanji is driving at, making the novel unsettling, in the narrative and the intrigue it builds, till, within the scope of a few pages, the novel takes an extremely powerful turn, by raising pointed questions about home, identity and (be)longing. What possibly also catches the reader unawares is the thwarting of the expectation that is raised by the title.

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Against the backdrop of Vassanji's earlier writing, the reader imagines, by looking at the title, that the novel will follow Vassanji's usual straightforward style. Through his interesting but uncomplicated plots the novel will lead the reader to the obvious sense of loss, anguish and longing that memory and displacement are bound to evoke. Yet this is where Vassanji springs a surprise on his readers. Not only is the plot of the novel situated in the future, but it also revolves around a doctor who is trying to cure his latest patient of the Leaked Memory Syndrome (or Nostalgia) - his area of specialisation. It is these that are likely to get the readers to believe that the novel falls in the genre of speculative fiction; given that they interpret literally both the time and the space, in which the novel is situated.

However, reading the novel as a piece of speculative fiction would be naïve. In fact, it is a more disturbing (re)presentation of the dilemmas of the diasporic than in his earlier books; as it works on two levels – on the surface portraying the dream of immortality, that can never be transmuted into a reality, while at a deeper level pointing towards a reality that is as true as that enshrined in George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty Four* (1949). What is worse is that the reality he hints at is one that is subtly unfolding at present.

In fact, his projection of the reality as one which may actually unfold in the future seems to, on the surface reduce its fear factor. However, it actually provides the scope for it to be entrenched deeper and in a more definitive way, as a consequence of it not been given adequate attention. As Nurse (2016) points out:

In his latest novel Vassanji continues his obsession with the missing past, but takes us in a new direction. The ironically titled 'Nostalgia' projects us into the future, speculating about what happens when people are determined to forget their pasts. What are the consequences, Vassanji asks, of a collective absence of nostalgia? (Nurse, 2016)

In a world where the myth of globalisation is being consistently exposed, with borders getting more deeply rooted, whether in the context of geopolitical leanings or racist actions, *Nostalgia* talks about an imaginary line - the Long Border, which attempts to keep out the have-nots, who remain "the persistent unknowable alien" (Vassanji 2016: 12). What makes the novel more interesting is that the attitude of the haves to these have-nots is ridden with ambiguity and irreconcilable oppositions. While on the one hand, the privileged North Atlantic Alliance (representing the haves) feels a sense of curiosity and empathy towards the have-nots – "...Once they are here, then we open our arms to this wretched of the earth and offer them a new life" (Vassanji 2016: 17), on the other, the privileged members are extremely wary of the have-nots and believe that they are justified in their attitude towards the have-nots – "As natural as it is for us to do anything we can to keep them there" (Vassanji 2016: 17).

It is not surprising that Vassanji has had to resort to allegory/magical realism in order to expose this reality, which is undoubtedly staring us in the face, but which we, as civilised nations, refuse to even acknowledge, let alone accept. In a world ridden with intolerance, his novel, had it not been a disguised one, could have attracted anything, from a fatwa to charges of sedition or libel or even deportation. In fact, many characters from the novel actually admit that the underprivileged region – Maskinia - is a point of curiosity, explored both through the news and by visits to the ‘sanitised and safe areas’, in the territory. Furthermore, Maskinia is also shown as a place exploited for its natural resources and has been made to suffer the trauma of the explosion of a reactor that has been set up in the area by the ‘civilised’ world. The echoes of this disaster are evident in the far reaching consequences that these underprivileged sections of the world are experiencing. Fleeting, the novel touches upon how the natives of Maskinia are born with eight fingers or two heads, as a result of this unthinking action and exploitation.

Without dwelling on it, the novel explores how far such exploitation is acceptable, while pointing to an actuality that is thinly veiled, for those who are aware and informed. The exploitation and experiences of Maskinia and its citizens take us back to those of colonisation and the Bhopal Gas Tragedy that India has had to face and whose effects are still being prominently experienced, more than two centuries and three decades, respectively, after the event². Along with touching upon this reality, the novel also explores the shifting attitudes of the citizens of the privileged society towards those across the Long Border;

I was young and idealistic then, and back home I genuinely despaired: how could we be blind to such disparities in our world? How could we shut them off? We needed a change in the world order. A revolutionary change. One day these wretched of the earth will rise and demand to be counted... It takes time to grow up to realise that all the world's problems will never be solved, poverty and violence will never be eradicated; hence we need the Border to protect ourselves. (Vassanji, 2016: 71)

What Vassanji seems to be commenting on is the need to take cognisance of and address the reality of the crossing of borders, not merely in the context of the present, but, more importantly, keeping in mind the historical narratives that affect and change both the context and its text. The attempt draws attention to the historical facts that countries and their citizens would rather prefer to ignore,

² On the night of 2nd December 1984, an industrial negligence in Bhopal, India led to a release of 30 tonnes of toxic methyl isocyanate (MIC) gas, exposing nearly 5 lakh people in the city to the deadly gas, causing more than 8,000 and leaving many maimed. For 30 years the people responsible for the accident couldn't be brought to justice. In 2014, the former chairman of Union Carbide, Warren Anderson, the main accused of the tragedy, died after leading his whole life in freedom in the United States, leaving permanent questions on Indian system of justice.

whether to protect their self-image or safeguard their interests. So too, most often, the approach of citizens of the 'host' country to diasporics is one that is defined by a focus on the present and its dilemmas, rather than being one, which is a consequence of a long series of events that have shaped and affected the present. The conflict between people on both sides of the borders, their respective understanding of the unfolding realities and the very language used to enshrine it seems, however, to be an outcome of the inseparable interlinking of the past, present and future. The people from the North Atlantic Alliance, who are described as terrorists, are seen by the people of Maskinia, as freedom warriors, echoing what T.S. Eliot has penned, almost a century ago, in *The Four Quartets*:

*Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future
And time future contained in time past.
If all time is eternally present
All time is unredeemable.* (Eliot, 1943:189)

The irony is that the truth of these warnings/visions seems to have gone unnoticed and unheeded; consequently, making life echo a reality of which we have been forewarned. Till these divergent realities are fused into one, the conflicts and ambiguities will not only persist, but will get more deeply entrenched and become, thereby, far more complicated.

Moreover, what is played out, at the macrocosmic or national level, is also bound to find reflection and repetition, at the microcosmic or individual level, seen in the approach of citizens of nation states to the 'other' – on both the sides of the border. What often complicates matters further is that layers get added on, to this approach. This results, many a times, in a total change of attitude, by the attitude becoming the opposite of what is first held. Interestingly, Vassanji has managed to explore this in diverse ways and at varied levels. He explores how the attitude towards the 'other' are not only often contradictory – ranging from curiosity to sarcasm and hatred and, in extremely rare instances, empathy – but they also change with time and according to situations.

Not only does the protagonist Dr. Frank Sina become emblematic of this change in attitude, but its volte face, from praise to hatred is seen in the approach of most people to Holly Chu, the journalist, who crosses the Border, to get 'home' information that is authentic and engrossing, serving largely to anchor stereotypes, about the other, as backward. However, the approach of 'her people' to her becomes its complete opposite, from praiseworthy to disparaging, when she, out of force, self-preservation instinct or choice, decides to identify with the cause of the 'other' and changes her identity, to become Umoja. Ironically, yet not surprisingly, this doesn't help her become more accepted in her home left behind, which, until then, she doesn't perceive as such either.

This tenuous link with identity is gradually unravelled, in the context of all the three major characters – the other two being Dr. Frank Sina and Presley. In a plot that takes sudden and unexpected turns, the very notion of identity is brought into question, as people are revealed to be somebody other than what they perceive themselves to be or as others define them. It is the ‘nostalgia’ or the ‘leaked memory syndrome’ that plagues them, which makes them seek their roots.

In this quest, what is also unearthed is that the identities they have acquired or have been thrust upon them are a result of the routes they have taken. All the three major characters in the novel realise this about themselves and get connected, in an unexpected, but extremely probable manner. In this, Vassanji turns the premise of all his earlier fiction – taking routes for finding roots - on its head. The novel thus moves within, instead of externally, as none other than Holly Chu actually takes routes.

What the novel reveals about the three characters is neither improbable nor impossible; and it is this that makes the novel, as Yakabuski (2017) states, a book that “is set in the future but a future that is not impossible”. It also draws attention to the fact that “the past can be present in the weirdest of manners. It can come wiggling back.” (Vassanji, 2016: 47). Thus, even though one might go to the extent of changing one’s identity or having it changed, by others (as Dr. Axe does, in the context of both Presley and Dr. Sina – given their histories that their new place of residence would want to deny), there is no denying it: “*can't control myself*, he was saying, *my self wants to come out*” (Vassanji, 2016: 194).

More so, this sense of identity brings along with it questions of (be)longing, which have to be addressed. What the novel hints at is that there is no escape from identity, even if an attempt has been made to mask it, whether by the individual or the nation state: “I don’t think I have a choice. I’m suffering from a certain malaise of the brain – the Nostalgia syndrome, as we call it – and my previous life is coming back to me and will soon overwhelm me in waves. It’s as simple as that” (Vassanji, 2016: 246).

This sense of belonging and longing gets intertwined, in an endless cycle doomed to chain one, afflicted by it, as is the case of the diasporic. However hard the diasporic attempts to bury or deny his/her past or to whatever extent, the national identity attempts to assimilate/change the diasporic identity, to make the diasporic a “benign nobody” (Vassanji 2016: 228), it is a reality that is bound, by its very nature, to remain a myth; and, if it were to metamorphose, to whatever extent and for whatever span of time, it will result in making the diasporic “A laughable, variegated man...a lonely man” (Vassanji, 2016: 228); not of much use either to himself/herself or the nation. The only choices that Vassanji thus seems to envisage, in the diasporic’s context, are return (as in the case of Holly Chu),

betrayal (as in the case of Presley) or rejection and an endless waiting, for its consequences to unfold (as in the case of Dr. Sina):

– I don't want to control it, Radha. I want it all to come back to me. I want to know who I was – actually who I was born as, who I really am. I want to recall my real family. I want to know my friends and relations even if they are now dead or unreachable to me.....There's much that's trying to repossess me. (Vassanji, 2016: 246)

The nostalgia enshrined in the title and floods the novel, thus operates at two levels that are ironically the opposites of one another, being yet indelibly interlinked. The novel unfolds, through the characters trying to suppress the nostalgia (leaked memory syndrome) or aid, in plugging it; but in doing so, they are destined to succumb to an actual nostalgia, that links them undeniably, to a past of which they are not even aware. Like an actor chained to his/her role, the novel exposes an individual, as chained undeniably to his/her identity, from which there is no escape or exit: – “There's a life I must reclaim, Radha...even briefly...even if it's in shreds, it's mine” (Vassanji, 2016: 247).

Furthermore, this link, with the past and with one's identity, the traces of which are bound to remain forever, is bound to shock and confuse and raise more questions than they seek to resolve: “*What made him drop all that and return home? What is home after all?*” (Vassanji, 2016: 256).

What is even more terrifying than this exposé is Vassanji's exploration of identity, as being essentially a fiction – a fiction that is created, at times, by the individual and, at other times, by the nation state; at times, for convenience, at others, for a reason – and yet, it being a fiction, it is bound, by its very nature, to implode and fail: “*your two favourite fictions rejected*” (Vassanji, 2016: 255).

All that this, in turn, is bound to lead to is a nostalgia of the third kind – one where a person looks at the past with a sense of satisfaction that is nevertheless tinged with regret and an endless sense of ‘might have beens’.

The apparent solution to this crisis, arising from (dis)placement and (be)longing, seems to lie in – “ONE WORLD FOR EVERY ONE!” (Vassanji, 2016: 126); and, while this may remain a distant or even utopian dream, until we at least attempt to face and resolve its contradictions and ambiguities, the problems that are emerging and repeating themselves, across time and space, are bound to never have any resolution. They will, in fact, spread wider and deeper, until they consume and overpower all within reach.

Even if we attempt to try and translate this almost impossibility into a reality, can it ever really resolve the issue or even offer respite or are we inseparably chained to our past? Can we ever deny who we are? Will the world allow us to forget? Even if

they do, how long before our memories and the ghosts of our past come back to haunt us? Does even the nation have the capacity to change us and our memories, so much that we will forget our identity and belonging? Or will there always remain the scope of leaked memories that will question identity and belonging and replace it by an eternal longing? These are the questions that *Nostalgia* hints at, alerting us to the catch 22 situation, that this (con)text engenders: “*Always dangerous, flights of imagination, no telling where they might take one. How much truth do they contain?*” (Vassanji, 2016: 257).

The picture that the novel paints is somewhat shocking, arousing in the informed reader a feeling of “horror, the horror”, of what we have sowed in the annals of history and are as a consequence doomed to reap, whether in the context of the individual or the nation state. Like any good writing, the novel draws attention to reality without making any attempt to offer solutions or even commenting on whether/if they are available.

In all, *Nostalgia* revolves around the idea that we need to be aware that the dilemmas of identity and (be)longing have a (his)story that may be ignored only at our peril. If countries, like the two faced Janus, are condemned to or then choose to look and act in opposite directions, the ambiguity that lies at the roots of these actions is bound to destabilise and compromise the future, if not the present. It is thus important to remain aware of the past and consciously take every decision and action rather than allowing our emotions to take over “what we are walling in or walling out.”

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