

Your fiction presents a tremendous range of human emotions and experiences, from simple joys of life to ironies of the most tragic kind. But these are repeatedly worked out in the context of a specific community which you fictionalize as the Shamsi community. Is it because you feel most at home with this community or...

This is not that unusual; we've seen it happen in Faulkner, Hardy, (Margaret) Laurence, Ngugi. I have also characters from a previous work in a new work, so Pipa of *The Book of Secrets* first appears in *The Gunny Sack* and in a story in *Uhuru Street*. It just seemed unnecessary to create a new character when I already had a host of them unexplored. You write about your world, every writer writes about his or her own world.

There is of course the risk of readers reading more into the characters, taking them to be real or even identifying some of them with me. There is nothing I can do about that. Characters undergo a great deal of transformation even if inspired by real people.

Do you find this context restrictive in some ways?

In some sense, yes; though I wonder which setting would not be restrictive. What to choose next: the urban women of Margaret Atwood? characters from Malgudi? the Rosedale setting of Robertson Davies?

My characters have lived in a variety of settings, from Porbander to Dar es Salaam to Boston and Toronto. I suppose what is common is their background, the 'community.' But that is not constant over time, and what I have attempted to do in my work, in partial terms (I have also tried to do many other things) is to trace the evolution of this 'background.' This will come to an end in present times, in the book that I have just completed in first draft.

Your African narrative is far more textured and complex than the Canadian narrative in 'No New Land'. Is this due to your own experiences in the two societies...

I See Myself in terms of Contradictions

M.G. Vassanji

in interview with Pankaj K. Singh*

The past I deal with in Africa is more distant, and so the process of its retrieval, larger questions about the relevance of history and memory, the pressure of the past on the present, have intrigued me and become part of the subject of the two novels you have in mind. Such questions do not easily arise in the case of the immediate past and the concerns of life as lived by immigrants in North America.

As far as forms are concerned, in the two novels, *The Gunny Sack* and *The Book of Secrets*, they were suggested by the nature of the novels, their subjects and concerns. The forms did not come prior to my thoughts and

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trials about what I was going to write.

You should remember that the stories in *Uhuru Street*, which are set in Africa also, are simply stories, in simple form, set in the past and not concerned with the past as such.

What is your novel about?

The book is called *Amrika*, a journey west, 'Amrika' being of course the Hindustani form of 'America.' I believe this will culminate my preoccupation with that community as background. I may continue to write about characters from that background, or I may not. But at present I feel a sense of finality, something coming to an end. Perhaps my novelistic preoccupations might change.

You have experienced, in a way, a double dislocation - from India and then from Africa, your birth place, into yet another culture, that of North America. How do you

relate to the multiple components of your experience or, may I say, your multiple locations?

I see myself in terms of contradictions. But contradiction for me is a healthy state, a creative state; purity I find abhorrent. And so I see myself as everything that's gone into me: Africa, where I was born and grew up; India in the larger sense, where my ancestry lies; Hinduism and Islam, which are my religious backgrounds; Britain, which colonized us and also built up some values and aspirations; America, where I went to university and spent what I consider crucial years of my life; and Canada, where I live and

which has, in spite of problems, embraced me so warmly. Of course, the world as we've seen it change in our lifetimes does not like such contradictions; it likes pure states; this or that. My answer is, *neti, neti*.

How did you relate to India before you came here?

Although I was brought up speaking Cutchi and Gujarati with a very strong sense of localized Indian culture - within a community - my education was in English and my first eleven years were spent in a British colonial situation. So most of us aspired to go to London, pick up better accents, become Westernized. India was not even a consideration. In university my engagement with India began because the Indian traditions I had been brought up with began to nag at me, yearning for understanding, as it were, a groundedness; one day I picked

up a copy of Nehru's autobiography in a book sale, after which I read many more books on India, mostly on mythology and religion, and even studied two years of Sanskrit in university. But later on, with my own family and other obligations, India as a strong preoccupation again receded into the background, until I was invited to come here in January 1993. Riots were on and I almost didn't come. . .

You had mentioned once that there is no 'homecoming'. One always goes to a new home. How have you felt after visiting India?

I first came to India four years ago; since then I have come every year. I have still not fully comprehended the impact of that first visit, I am working on it, in the form of a book. Everything looked so familiar, it was eerie; I seemed to fit in so easily. I could speak Gujarati and Cutchi, understand Sindhi, communicate passably in Hindi. I could identify so much with the place, the people, especially in the north; very few people asked me where I came from, and that not seriously, and when I answered 'Bombay' or 'Gujarat' these answers were accepted. What I realized soon enough, however, was that I had not internalized the recent history of the subcontinent. That was the difference, not the externals. And I realized there were some things that had become completely alien to me, that distressed me - to find religion as a mode of identity, where simple agnosticism is not even a category: religious belief, culture, the self, all fused into one and accepted more or less by all; to find residues of an 'us' and 'them' mentality in even the most liberal of people; and the total sanguineness in the face of corruption and the most gruesome violence. At the same time there were joyful things - I had forgotten the joy of singing, of watching people spontaneously break out into song.

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