

M.G. Vassanji is a Toronto-based novelist of Indian origin. Born in Kenya and raised in Tanzania, he went to university in the United States - at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the University of Pennsylvania - where he trained as a nuclear physicist. He taught and did research at the University of Toronto before his first novel *The Gunny Sack* received a Commonwealth Regional Prize for the best first novel, and was followed by *No New Land* (1991) and a collection of short stories *Uhuru Street* (1992). His next novel, *The Book of Secrets* (1993) won the prestigious Giller Prize for the best Canadian novel of the year. In 1989 he was also an international writer-in-residence at the University of Iowa. The interview with Vassanji was conducted when he was a Fellow at the IIAS.

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Amrika, a Journey West

from

M.G. VASSANJI'S WORK IN PROGRESS

California. Was it always in the mind? Go West, young man, they used to say, didn't they - whoever they were - the movies most likely; or, as Grandmother would say, citing ancient lore with wide-eyed confidence or, later, a knowing smile at my teenager's new-fangled scientific scepticism - the sun will rise from the West, that's where the Lord will come from, the salvation. Later still, hippies beckoned with flowers and pot and freedom from norms, and West Coast girls were ... and Berkeley was radical Mecca, that's where the revolution came from and I thought Grandmother had been right after all. Ultimately, we learnt to settle down, adopting East Coast values and ways and could tell the difference between the flaky West and the solid East of the ivy league and Henry James and Boston, and subways and trams, and grey gritty streets in biting cold and apartments in alleys up dark creaky stairs in spite of which there was history and culture and irony. And California, too good to be true, always far out and a little too much...except those who went there inevitably fell to the wiles of the sun god and never returned. And the sea, don't forget old Neptune.

He had come to forget and start anew. Actually to dare, do the unthinkable, cohabit with a younger woman and think about the future. Again. His future; their future. Out in the East, he thought, he would be filled with grave doubts and anxious pangs of puritanical guilt at pursuing something so utterly selfish and joyful.

There were endless afternoons of love-making, of prolonged teased-out passion - tender moments of simple closeness, of oneness in body and soul, full of touching endearments, past misunderstandings now unwrapped and delightful as sweetmeats, memories and childhood stories shared and become part of each other. There were past lives to make up for, all that time now lost that they wished they had spent together. And there were so many places to connect, in which to begin to make up for that time: those little details in which to give more of each other, and open up more...and, ironically, isn't there even more left of ourselves; but we try, fragile victims of our mysterious selves, and in understanding of that we listen to each other.

It seemed that the physical - intense and vigorous and wonderful in itself - was but a paltry reminder of their emotional and spiritual

closeness.

"Rumina mimina..."

"Do I remind you of the little African girls in your street?"

"Yes...skipping rope or playing house or hopskotch..."

"Why...what reminds you of them?"

"I don't know."

"Perhaps it's my Africanness - perhaps it's all a romantic infatuation with the exotic - the other, is that what it's called -"

"I don't care for hidden meanings. All I know is that I love you very much now."

There is nothing else like such moments, one is such a child.

Is one entitled to this happiness? I've been taught of second chances but only when the outcome was spiritual. The world is a prison, we were taught, bondage to the body. The wise opt out of it, escape the endless cycle of birth and rebirth. That was your second chance. But a happy rebirth, second chance to a life of *this* world, to sensual homely happiness, seems like stealing from the cookie jar.

The sobriety came, inevitably; and the consciousness of homemaking: a relief to his cynical, puritan side that would tremble superstitiously at his bliss, but a come-down also, a reminder of past experience...isn't homemaking the end of passion and the beginning of partnership, the business of relationship? No no no no, she said, that is all wrong, it needn't be so, I will not permit it to happen...

Homemaking was to her, as he realized with tenderness, a consummation, flowering; a schoolgirl's romantic dream that had never seen fulfillment. But there was more to her craving; a home of her own was her second chance, the future that would seal off her terrible past. Only, was this jaded academic liberal turned printer, with a set of twins of his own, ready for that future?

"A little future," she said, with a sly smile.

"But that will grow."

He threw a glance at the entwined Makonde monkey carving. "Do you think the bad-luck genie can untangle that abstraction?"

"There is no bad-luck genie. That's just superstition. I have decided that."