

Where is What I Started For Nation, Novel and Ideology in Vassanji's *AMRiiKA*

by HARISH NARANG

History fascinates Vassanji. If there is one common thread running through all his fiction – novels as well as short stories – it is his concern for history – history of individuals, communities and nations. Vassanji believes that fictional mode is a very valid mode – more valid than the mode of social sciences – for perceiving and writing the history of a society, including that of its individual members. In this, he is with Karl Marx, who while paying a glowing tribute to the English novelists of the nineteenth century – Dickens et al. – had observed that from them one could learn more about the history, politics and economy of Victorian England than from the social scientists of the time.

One cannot also help recalling, at this juncture, observations made by Aristotle in his *Poetics* about the similarity between the functions of poetry – representing all forms of writing, including fiction – and history. In fact, Aristotle places poetry on a higher pedestal because it deals not only with 'what had been' – history does that too – but also with 'what might be' – this history does not do.

Vassanji finds the histories of individuals, communities and nations not only significant and insightful but also closely interrelated. Therefore, he structures his narrative in such a manner and chooses such modes of narration that would enable him to place all three – individuals, communities and nations – on the axis of simultaneity. Thus in *The Gunny Sack*, through the portrayal of the history of Dhanji-Govindji, his daughter-in-law Jibai and the narrator Kala nee Salim, Jibai's grand nephew – simultaneously – Vassanji focusses on the history of the entire overseas community of Shamsis which is in diaspora with India, having left the shores of western Gujrat – Kutch and Kathiawar, Junagarh and Porbandar – at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of

the twentieth, to make East Africa their new home. The sense of simultaneity that I have spoken about above which is so very crucial to Vassanji's world-view, is created by the writer moving his narrative back and forth both in terms of time and space – between the present and the past, between Bagamoyo and Junapur, between Tanzania of today and India of yesteryears. Thus while tracing the origins of Dhanji-Govindji, Vassanji traces, in the same episode, the origins of the entire community by dramatising the moment of their conversion to a sect of Islam by a Persian Pir called Shamas.

Origins also fascinate Vassanji and he is always interested in beginnings. 'Begin at the beginning' is a favourite expression of Miss Penny nee Mrs. Gaunt, Kala's English teacher in *The Gunny Sack*. **Beginning** is also Vassanji's favourite site for perceiving the contesting identities of individuals as well as of communities, if not of nations. For instance, there is quite a mystery that Vassanji weaves around the origins of characters like the Zanzibari woman, Bibi Taratibu and Huseini in *The Gunny Sack* and Nurmohamed alias Mzee Pipa, Mariamu and Akber Ali in *The Book of Secrets*. And the way the destinies of these individuals get mixed with those of their Communities and even nations to which they belong, shows once again Vassanji's fascination for viewing history as it rotates simultaneously on more than one axes. Dhanji-Govindji's obsessive love for his son Huseini, for instance, leads to his swindling the community of its funds and its eventual divisions into violent factions from which – the author suggests elsewhere – it could not recover for a long time. Similarly, Mzee Pipa's involvement with Mariamu in *The Book of Secrets* gets him mixed up with the Anglo-German rivalry to control parts of East Africa during the First World War. Again, in the same book, Akber Ali's mysterious

parentage – it is never revealed fully whose son he really is – leads to many a twist and turn in the fate of not only the Shamsi communities in the townships of Kikono and Moshi but of the British and German colonial rules as well.

It may be of interest to observe here, before we move on to *AMRiiKA*, that Vassanji bestows mixed parentage on some of his central characters to signify the diasporic situation which for him – as also for many other immigrant writers – is a favourite site for the perception of merging identities of individuals, communities and nations. Thus Huseini in *The Gunny Sack* is the son of Dhanji-Govindji's union – illegal – with African Bibi Taratibu which represents, among others, the hierarchy of social relations between immigrant Indians and native Africans in a typical colonial sandwich situation. In *The Book of Secrets*, Akber Ali represents a similar hierarchy but between the coloniser British represented by Alfred Corbin – the alleged father of Akber Ali – and the colonized Indians, represented by Mariamu – the mother of Akber Ali.

First person narration through the persona of the protagonists is Vassanji's favourite narrative mode. In *The Gunny Sack*, it is Kala nee Salim, the grand nephew of Jibai and in *The Book of Secrets*, it is Pius Fernandes, a retired teacher of history. This kind of mode of narration – Vassanji also uses it for telling many a short tale in his collection of short stories, *Uhuru Street* – gives him an opportunity to not only move back and forth in time and space but also to embed tales within tales so that, as he puts in *The Book of Secrets*, the tale 'ingests us and carries us with it and so it grows' (p. 2).

Vassanji's *AMRiiKA*, published in 1999, has all of these distinguishing features of his writings, namely, his fascination for history and his fancy for origins – of individuals, communities and

nations. There is also this mystery surrounding some characters and hybridity built into the parentage of at least one crucial character. The mode of narration too is first person and the persona is that of a Tanzanian Shamsi from Dar es Salaam whose origins go back to Gujrat in India and who finds himself first studying at the Tech in Boston and later settling down in the USA.

But then let me begin, a la Vassanji himself, at the beginning. Let me talk first of the title of the novel – *AMRiiKA* – which is in itself a phonological hybrid – a partly assimilated mutant – of the English word America which incidentally in turn has a hybrid inheritance as well. There could not have been a more appropriate metaphor for studying the glocal situation of the world that Vassanji analyses in the book. Again, what could be more appropriate location – the title page and the title word – to announce his intentions. In fact, there is hybridity built into the very orthography of the word *AMRiiKA* – what with two dotted 'i's wedged between caps 'AMR' and 'KA'.

As stated above, observing individuals, communities and nation on axes of simultaneity – of time and space – is of crucial significance to Vassanji for his objective – certainly implicit if not explicit – of perceiving and evaluating cultures and societies in flux. The beginning of the narration in *AMRiiKA* – the first 14 pages to be more precise – is truly a tour de force of both structure and style in capturing this simultaneity. Let me elaborate on this a little, citing some quotes from the novel.

The novel begins with the narrator – Ramji is his name and he is a middle-aged Shamsi of Indian origin who had migrated from Dar es Salaam to the USA as a young graduate student, studying hardcore science at the Tech – telling us that he is writing his memoirs “not without encouragement – to imagine beginnings, yes and more, to sustain them and guide them to my present conditions, here in the obscurity of these rented rooms near a beach” (p. 2). These memoirs, Ramji tells us further, will heal

‘my wounds’ and ‘even save my soul from endless torments’ (p. 2). If reference to ‘wounds’ and ‘endless torments’ to the soul are not enough to arouse our curiosity to read on and know further about the narrator, we are also told these memoirs are also the subject of ‘the probing attentions of a certain representative of the law’ who ‘does not interfere as yet but hovers just beyond the edge of my narrative’ (p. 2).

And then the narrator plunges into what he calls ‘a constructed origin’, – something that we know Vassanji relishes doing for his characters – portraying ‘a short stout old woman in a soft long dress with graying hair’ who we are told was his ‘grandma . . . a singer and healer who . . . when she sang, she opened curiosity and old cupboards and strange premonitions and desires, even the desire to get away, leave everything behind’ (p.3).

This, in fact, is what Vassanji himself does – opening ‘curiosity’ and ‘old cupboards’ – what he narrates next – of course, through the memoirs of Ramji:

Our ancestors were Hindus who were converted to a sect of Islam and told by that refugee from Mongols to await the final avatar of their god Vishnu. In Grandma’s words, the sun would arise that day from the west. How far was the west? Where did it begin? (p. 3)

Before we’ve savoured these details fully – they are coming really thick and fast, thanks to Vassanji’s style of writing in concentric circles – he has opened yet another window – the novel could as well have been called *Windows 99* – for us, much in the same fashion as we go on opening them on a PC monitor screen:

My people sought it first in Africa, an ocean away, where they settled more than a hundred years ago. But in time, this west moved further and became – America; or as Grandma said it: *Amriika*. (p.3)

And then we are made privy to the scene of Ramji’s departure for ‘that Eldorado’ – *Amriika* – at the Dar es

Salaam airport – a scene which Vassanji no doubt creates to imply the next stage of the Indian-African diaspora.

I remember going through the immigration checkpoint and turning around for one last look at Grandma: standing stiffly among the crowd, feigning sternness for grief, her right arm still raised in the goodbye she’d said minutes before, the hands closing and opening as if mechanically in one endless farewell. (p. 4)

Portrayed as a typical airport farewell in an era when not so many travelled to the west, – certainly not in big droves in which they do today – the scene still holds the strong emotive power for both those leaving and those staying back. But then that’s what Vassanji is best at – creating very dramatic, emotionally charged scenes from life which bring, at times, tears into the eyes of readers.

What is, however, of more significance – certainly from the point of view of the narrative – is the revelation by Ramji of the year of his departure: August 1968, a date which facilitates Vassanji to ‘crack open’, for our view, a whole new vista of a world from the past, – the America of the Spring of ‘68, when violence erupted across the whole nation against what a character in the novel calls ‘fuckin’ fascist country’; when drug peddlers and draft dodgers – it was the height of the Vietnam war – ruled the roost in school and university campuses; and when ‘everywhere gurus, pirs, psychologists, zealots of every stripe were fishing for disciples’ to bring comfort to ‘homeless tortured spirits’. (p. 29)

With this, Vassanji had set the tone for the core of his novel – for the next 400 pages or so – which deals with that most turbulent period of not only American but world history since the end of the Second World War – whether cold or hot – when the agenda for peace, for civil and minority rights including rights of blacks and women, were foregrounded and hopes raised for a more just and democratic world order in which war

will have no place and in which the infamous Monroe doctrine of American hegemony will have little relevance.

How that dream turned sour, dashing hopes of a new dawn into a frightening nightmare is what the novel portrays next, through the life of Ramji. At this level, *AMRiiKA* is the story of an immigrant to America and his efforts to negotiate the identity crisis triggered by the gap between the anchoring spiritual values brought from back home – to practice faith daily, not to drink, not to succumb to sexual temptations and the sheer materialism of his new homeland. This is aggravated by the yawning chasm between the romantic notion of America, nay *AMRiiKA*, of his adolescent school days' imagination – John F. Kennedy and his brother Bobby are its human icons and the landing on the moon is the ultimate symbol of its supremacy in the field of science and technology – and the harsh, blind reality he finds himself into on arrival there, a reality in which the Industrial-Military complex pursues its economic agenda relentlessly, completely oblivious of its impact on the lives of people both within America and without. It is as a result of his inability to skirt around and negotiate this chasm between dream and reality that Ramji becomes a drifter – both in personal life and professional career – pursuing girls and gurus, changing jobs and wives and converging, finally, towards an organization which seems to be pushing a fundamentalist agenda in the grab of ethnicity and radicalism. In portraying this, Vassanji examines Ramji's historical roots – both in Africa and India – very critically and does not absolve the past of its responsibility in the resultant mess that Ramji makes of his life in the USA. So far so good, since this is what Vassanji had done previously too – in *The Gunny Sack*, *No New Land*, *Uhuru Street* and *The Book of Secrets*.

At another level – and this to my mind is more significant, ideologically, since it sets *AMRiiKA* apart from Vassanji's earlier books – the novel turns the gaze from the past back in Bagamoyo or Dar es Salaam in Tanzania or Kutch

and Porbandar in India to the present in Boston and Chicago in America, examining critically the socio-politico-cultural goals and objectives being pursued by the government of the United States of America vis-a-vis the ideals enshrined in its Constitution. And it is here – in turning the gaze within – that Vassanji's world-view, his ideological standpoint about America manifests. Choosing, as he does, a very volatile period in the history of post Second World War America, Vassanji portrays very dramatically through some of its most prominent frozen frames – a grief-stricken Jacky clad in all black standing at the Arlington cemetery before the burial of her assassinated husband, John Junior, all dignity, saluting his father's coffin, a napalm-hit Vietnamese girl – aflame – running naked on a street in Vietnam – critique of a society divided vertically on the questions of civil and other minority rights and on the manner of pursuing and realizing its ideals and goals.

And this is where *AMRiiKA* runs into trouble – though for no fault of the author except that of choosing to tell the truth, his truth, about the America of the sixties and the seventies. A post-Gulf war United States of America – drunk on the reality of being the sole superpower in a unipolar world – has become brash and arrogant, showing absolutely no qualms about not only of its present acts – repeated bombing of Iraq in total defiance of the world opinion and its total support to Israel in its repeated acts of violence and terror against the people of Palestine and a testimony of this – but also its dubious past. Some of the reviews and reactions which *AMRiiKa* has attracted – and we know these are never as innocent as they appear to be – bear testimony to this intolerance. What is, however, of more substance and significance is the implicit ideological insight provided by Vassanji in his novel that the recent spread of religious bigotry and fundamentalism and its militant manifestation in various parts of the world – Afghanistan, Chechnya, Kashmir, to name just a few – which the U.S.A. opposes so vehemently may have

actually been spawned by its own acts of intolerance against its own people beginning in the late sixties.

What happened on September 9, 2001 in the USA and what has been happening in Afghanistan and Palestine since then was anticipated by Vassanji in his novel *AMRiiKA* in the episode involving the bombing of the bookstore in Ashfield:

Then late Friday night the bookstore was bombed; events took a frightening turn . . . the movement had to be behind the bombing, it was just that sort of thing it would do, to draw attention to Islamic extremism.

However, the reactions – attacks on non-European minorities indiscriminately after Sep. 9 – showed that America had not learnt its lessons.

I read this interpretation very clearly in Vassanji's choice of the epigraph from America's most powerful and prophetic poetic voice – of Walt Whitman:

(But where is what I started for so long ago?
And why is it yet unfound?)

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