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Varinder Kumar
Department of English, DAV
College Abohar, Punjab, India

The post-colonial disappointment: An interpretation of the in - between world of Vikram lall

Varinder Kumar

Abstract

The present paper will explore the post-colonial disappointment in *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall* as a trope in the writing of East African-Asian writer, M.G. Vassanji. The novel is the voice of a character, Vikram Lall, described as “a cheat of monstrous reptilian” who is currently in exile after being framed in an international scandal by Kenyan politicians. This paper intends to demonstrate the profound and careful examination of one man’s search for his place in the world; as it takes up the themes of nature of community in a volatile society, the relations between colony and colonizer, and the inescapable presence of the past. It is a hard process of creation, discovery and finally a deeply personal work.

Keywords: Post-colonial, disappointment, colonizer, inescapable, exile

Introduction

The old order has been consecrated, the tiff fortified: far from offering food and freedom, independence has presented people with a wooden loaf (Roy, 231)

As the dawn of Independence opens its eyes on a country, it gets exposed to all those challenges that are posed for the newly formed government. After the long phase of imperialism, when the people of a country gain independence, all their hopes and expectations are fixed on the new administration. They naturally desire traces of imperial rule to be erased; equal rights in all spheres; no discrimination of any kind, they want justice and all that they were devoid of under the colonial rule. But the question that has arisen in all the Third World countries, after they got independence is, did they get it? Did they become ‘free’ in the real sense of the word? Answer to these questions have been sought by various people and what they have observed is that none of the newly independent countries, naming a few-Africa, India, West Indies etc. have got independence in the way in which they had wanted it. Though, the colonial master retreated, and left the country in the hands of the nationalist leaders, the people, the proletariat, still had the subordinate position in the social, economical, political domain which it had in the earlier times.

Since the early 1970’s, the post colonial nations have been increasingly plagued by neo-colonial ills: economic disorders and social malaise, government corruption, state repression, various carry overs from the prebendal and command structures of the colonial period. In the much of the once-colonized world, decolonization in-fact produced few changes: power hierarchies were maintained, the values of the former colonizer remained influential. Liberation equated with ‘flag independence’, a change of political arrangement only

(Boehmer, 230-31)

Ellecke Boehmer’s statement explains the situation of the new but ailing nations very well. The illusion that the nationalist leaders created for the people before independence are shattered. In-fact, the post-colonial period has turned out as one of grim disillusionment. It is a period when the people after having struggled against the alien colonizers, have had to struggle against the new colonizers who belong to their own country: those, whom they have themselves made to occupy the seats of power.

Correspondence
Varinder Kumar
Department of English, DAV
College Abohar, Punjab, India

Multiple reasons for such disillusionment have been looked for. Writers of the post colonial era, like Rushdie, Naipaul, Vassanji, Achebe, Ngugi, Coetzee, Armah have tried to delve into it and search for viable reasons and factors that have led to such a state of affairs.

These are the writers who have addressed the post-colonial world that has still not been able to come out of the horrors of the colonial era. Hence, as they write about the present, they cannot be oblivious of the past of the post-colonial countries. The shadow of the colonial era follows them in all of their works and all of those are attempts to explore the various reasons for the present destabilizing situation of the once colonized countries. The novels of the kind, known as the novels of disenchantment started appearing from the late 1960's: Achebe's *A Man of the People* (1966) and *Anthills of the Savannah*; Armah's *The Beautiful ones Are Not Yet Born* (1969); Naipaul's *The Mimic Men* (1967) *Geurillas* (1975) and *A Bend in the River* (1979); Ngugi's *Devil on the Cross* (1982), and *Shame* (1983) by Salman Rushdie: all these and many more appearing after then have been exploring the post-colonial condition.

Joining the league of the above listed works, a novel that appeared recently was that of *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall* (2003) by M.G. Vassanji. He aims to analyse the two phases in the history of Kenya; colonial, and the post-colonial. While, we find a very important role played by the Mau-Mau rebels in the colonial phase, in order to attain freedom for Kenya; in the post-colonial era, we find the government as the new insidious power that is trying to suck every little bit of material wealth that has been spared by the colonizer in the nation. What is more interesting to see is, how Vassanji, along with probing into these issues, shows successfully the impact they have on the individual lives. The lives of common people, who like all others, expect a peaceful, smooth life after independence, is so bitterly affected by the post-colonial times that they have no other option but to leave the land and settle elsewhere.

Vassanji's attempt is to show how the phase after the colonizer's retreat is worse than the times of the colonizers reign. The novel is not about the successful post-colonial world, but about the negative aspects of post colonialism, the way modern Kenya has taken its shape. The novel features the failure of revolutions because of politics, corruption, opportunism, racial-antagonism, moral conflicts etc. On top of these vices, is the bourgeoisie which had been serving the interests of the colonizers in their rule, and after their departure, follow their path betraying the aspirations of the masses who confide in it. To quote Jean Paul Sartre's famous statement:

We know that it is not a homogenous world, we know too that enslaved people are still to be found there, together with some who have achieved a simulacrum of phoney independence, others who are still fighting to attain sovereignty, and others again who have obtained complete freedom but who live under the constant menace of imperialist aggression. These differences are born of colonial history, in other words of oppression. Here, the mother country is satisfied to keep some feudal rulers in her pay; there dividing and ruling she has created a native. Bourgeoisie, sham from beginning to end...

(Sartre, 1957)

It is definitely a point of agreement when Sartre says that the emergence of the bourgeoisie is a result of the dividing colonial history. It stands as a class of the society that take advantage of the emotional and social upheaval that the advent of independence cause. They use the situation to their benefit and grab the positions left vacant by the colonizers. In Frantz Fanon's views, the demonic figure of the colonizers is replaced by the corrupt bourgeoisie that flaunts the hopes of the masses for justice, equality, fair distribution of economy, respect, dignity, peace and happiness (Fanon.1957). These views came long before the impact of the post-colonialism could be seen; hence what Fanon says is a prophetic vision of what we are experiencing today.

Vassanji provides us with a close view into the bourgeoisie of the neo-colonial Kenya, a part of which is the protagonist, Vikram Lall and his family. We are shown how from the small time business town of Nakuru, Vikram's father ascends to the position of a high class property advisor, after he takes advantage of the period of transition from colonialism to independence. Later on, even Vikram Lall emerges as a gobbler, a man who has to his credit the dubious title of being 'one of Africa's most corrupt men, a cheat of monstrous and reptilian cunning', as he confesses in the first page of the novel.

To me has been attributed the emptying of a large part of my troubled country's treasury in recent year. I head my county's list of shame.

Though, in the course of our reading of the novel, we realize that Vikram is merely a pawn in the hands of the corrupt leaders of Kenya like Paul Nderi, he is a kind of conduit, a channel through which money changes hands from Kenya to other corners of the world, and less of a figure that can be blamed, and declared guilty for doing all those acts after being fully aware of the pros and cons. He is a puppet in the hands of the ministers and higher officers, an easy target, as are the non-natives in every society. This shows the fragile status of the non-natives, who can neither return to their ancestral lands, nor can claim a right to the land where they live. In the colonial times, Vikram's father could not afford to lose the goodwill he had in the British colonizers, nor could he show any kind of negative feelings for the Blacks, as there is fear of the Mau-Mau hanging above his and his family's necks. He can not go back to India where he has been only once in his life and that too, to return with experiences that have engraved in his mind, a kind of repulsion, a certain degree of hatred for the country. His mind is full of visions of India that don't allow him to go back again.

Even to see the TajMahal you had to walk over gutters and push through a street fight, he would say. Beggars and touts everywhere... Even a taxi. You hail one,you step into a lump of fresh shit!

Nor can he be a native, a resident of Kenya as are the Blacks, owing to the differences in the colour and to the hidden Indian-ness in their partly foreign bodies. He might have an attitude of repulsion for India, but the Indian ancestry, the Indian backdrop is something he can never shed off. This leads to a complex attitude towards his

present position. His reactions towards various events depends on the way he, as an Asian, an immigrant, a non-native and non-British is related to it. He cannot even relate to the Kenyan soil or culture, nor can he feel alien like the British do. So every thing that comes his way is analysed by him on the grounds of the benefit it can do to his position in the country. This is how Vikram later on gets involved in the gemstone scandal, and many other similar activities before that. The ruling forces exploit this positions—this state of non-relatedness—and make full use of Vikram as a middle man. And when they find him no longer of any use, they trap him and are after him. He has no option but to leave Kenya and emigrate to Canada.

A similar situation is seen in Naipaul's *A Bend in the River*, when Indar, once a promising young provincial, who is sought by Foundations in the United States, is later on a discarded, and is a hopeless man with no place to go.

From time to time that is all he knows, that is time for him to go home. There is some dream village in his head. In between he does the lowest kind of job. He knows he is equipped for better things but he does not want to do them. I believe he enjoys being told he can do better. We have given up now. He does not want to risk anything again.

(Naipaul 1995, 295)

This leads us to another important aspect of the Post-colonial times, that of racial and cultural discrimination. Though, this is a result of the detestable practices in the colonial times, it is something which should have been left behind and rejected in the post colonial times. But we find that these discriminatory practices continue even after the invaders have retreated. The walls that had been constructed by the invaders to make their rule more convenient are allowed to stay intact, as those who acquire positions after them, want to have similar powers. The new leaders carry on the legacy of the imperialistic powers. They are not the ideal leaders, but are exploiters, who, realizing that people cannot themselves come out, make full use of the situation and seek the opportunity to come forward as their representatives. This happens to be a problem with Third World countries like Kenya, where people trust such leaders without trying to know about their real intentions. Such opportunists and exploiters are present in all Third World countries. In Vassanji's novel, we have the figure of Jomo Kenyatta, the President of the newly independent Kenya, who wants to have a present from all those who approach him. The fact to be noticed here is: Can all the people of a newly independent state afford bringing presents for the President, as they come to him with their pleadings? It shows the kind of Commitment and loyalty he has for his job and his countrymen.

A similar kind of a ruler is seen in Naipaul's novel, as stated by Edward Said, in the form of the Big Man-

who manipulate European consultants, Indian and Muslim minorities, and his own tribes people in and out of rigid nativist doctrine; by the end of the book many of his subjects have been mercilessly killed; the one or two who service the onslaught and realize what is happening—like Salim, the protagonist—decide that the situation is hopeless and yet another emigration is required.

(Said, 320)

When such people are on the seat of authority, the worst condition is of the idealists like Njoroge, in *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall*, who waited for the dawn of independence to shine more than anything else. For him independence means more than the retreat of the colonizers. It is to him the right to stand up for freedom, to have the right to speak out freely, not to be pushed back into silence. The post-colonial disillusionment, in his case, is of the worst form as it deflates the spirit and energy in him. It drains out the entire sense of struggle and the nationalist feelings that have been bubbling with in him since his childhood.

But Njoroge's hero, he said, was Moses... Jomo is Moses.... A different kind of Moses, then. He would not take his people anywhere, just send the others away.... All our heroes did wonderful things, but Njoroge's Jomo-Moses was different. He was alive, He was in prison. And he had powers.

The childhood faith is so strong that Njoroge in order to take Vikram in his confidence, makes him take the Mau-Mau oath, something which Vikram tries to take advantage of years later. As a grown up, Njoroge is a promising young man, the leader of the future, the voice of Kenya's tomorrow. He is brimming with revolutionary ideas, and thoughts for his country's betterment, but he is not like the ruling leaders. Thus he proves to be an obstacle in their path. Once Njoroge has had a full view of the situation in Kenya, he is utterly disillusioned.

...the world is too much beyond our control, we thought we could make a difference to it.

This is the sense of disappointment which follows the euphoria, the elation, and the bonhomie of independence. The same disappointment is faced by the people who have actually fought for the independence of the nations, those who have borne the bullets and wounds of the colonizers on their bodies. The revolutionaries, the activists have a lot many expectations and dreams to fulfil in the post-independence phase, but what happens is exactly the opposite. Rather than being honoured, they are addressed as terrorists. They have to hide in the forests and have no home in the country for which they had sacrificed all the comforts of the civilized world. In Vasanji's novel, we see the Mau-Mau demanding rehabilitation, which is a must in the newly independent countries, but also something, for which the governments have nothing but consolations.

We gave up our property, we gave up our good job with our English bosses, who were generous for the times....why do our politicians call us outlaws and bandits, aren't we the army of the people? Even now we are ready to defend them.....we gave up all that for freedom for Uhuru...

But as we see that in the novel, and also in the world around us, the governments have no time or money for the welfare of these freedom fighters. They are left to fend for themselves, only a few smart ones, who are able to catch up with the winds of the corrupt times can make it to the higher positions. They join hands to accelerate the processes of corruption and injustice. The wounds of the past, the damages of the times gone by, are left open, so that time and

again, they can be scratched and refreshed to be used for the benefit of those seated high. The required compromising tone, which is a feature of Derek Walcott's poetry, is not adopted. In his poems, the past is left behind and future is accepted by striking a compromise with the past what is desired is humanism, compassion and understanding of the material world.

The world is blameless. The darker crime/is to make a career of conscience,/to feel through our own nerves the silent scream/of winter branches, wonders read as signs.

In J. M. Coetzee's novel *Disgrace* a note of compromise, reconciliation is struck when the acts of present are considered as fruits of the past and are accepted by the individuals. Such compromise is necessary for the post-colonial times as in its absence; it is tough to move towards the future and gain 'freedom' in its real sense. If it is not sought, the wounds of the past would stay fresh in the future generations as well. They try to achieve the dreamt freedom by walking on the path of violence and aggression something which the older generations had done in their times.

We may need their methods, Joseph says to me and, with a sparkle in his eyes and all the earnestness of his age; speaking of the Mau-Mau. Even these days, right now, my people are being oppressed; they are being driven from their homes and butchered. But we will fight back-with guns, not machetes!

In such a scenario, the post-colonial nations show little hope of a Prosperous and bright future. They develop slowly, at a creepy pace and thus, are behind the times. The fault lies not in the present, but in the past itself. The revolution that takes in its hands, the job of over turning the imperial power must be socialistic, as only then would independence of the real kind would be attained. In the words of Sartre:

In order to triumph, the national revolution must be socialist, if its carrier is cut short, if the native bourgeoisie takes over power, the new state, in spite of its formal sovereignty remains in the hands of the imperialists.

(Sartre iii)

In his prophetic vision of the present times, Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth*, foresaw all these events. He said that if the national consciousness was not transformed into social one, what was gained would be only an extension of imperialism. In his words

National consciousness must now be enriched and deepened by a very rapid transformation into a consciousness of social and political needs, in other words, into (real) humanism.

(Fanon, 204)

The concern, in the light of the above statement should be 'humanistic', and not only political. This is possible only where the natives realize their capabilities and the results of their dependence on the leaders like Ndery, Jomo, Big Man etc., only then can the sun of independence provide the light of freedom to the nations and the fog of post-colonial

ailments be cleared. Thus we see that M. G. Vassanji's novel is an eloquent statement on the state of post-colonial societies in the present. Here independence in the constitutional right is not enough; it should not be confused with the meaning of 'real' freedom in the cultural, psychological and human dimensions.

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