

History, Memory, Home

An Exchange with M.G. Vassanji

M.G. Vassanji was in Vancouver in the summer of 2004 to address the International Association of University Professors of English. After his public reading at the conference, he came to the offices of *Canadian Literature* to talk with Susan Fisher about his recent fiction and its connections to Africa, North America, and South Asia.

SUSAN FISHER (SF): I want to begin by talking about your 1999 novel *Amriika*, which certainly seemed like a departure from your other published work. Even though your central character Ramji is from Dar es Salaam, the focus of the book is not East Africa but the United States during the Vietnam War. Why were you drawn to this particular social landscape?

M.G. VASSANJI (MGV): That period—the early seventies, which I spent in the US—was extremely important in my life. I felt that I grew up again, or attained a second maturity. I discovered freedom and choice, and that your views on an issue can matter. For me, that period was a huge awakening. I remember in 1972 in New Haven sitting up all night to watch the Democratic National Convention—democracy and choice in action. People chose with a passion that year. I came from a society where this just didn't happen. Secondly, *Amriika* was a book that continued the voyage of people emigrating from India to the west. *The Gunny Sack* began with the story of a man who went to East Africa in the early part of the twentieth century; *Amriika* looks at a young man who goes to the United States, which represents the ultimate West—

metaphorically if nothing else. Going west began by going to Africa, then going to America and to Los Angeles as the farthest west that you could go, next to stepping off into the ocean and going back to India.

SF: I love the way you start *Amriika* with an epigraph from Whitman, who is looking west across the Pacific to what he sees as eastern origins.¹

MGV: Yes . . . a lot of people see *Amriika* as a departure but I didn't. I always wanted to explore the political aspects of emigration and exile, the contradictions and dangers of activism, because this is a question for many of us who come from those parts of the world that are now riven by strife. At what point does activism turn rotten? For me even now it's a question that is important.

SF: In *Amriika*, you seem to be creating parallels between the Weatherman-style violence that the protagonist gets involved with in the early 1970s and the Islamic fundamentalist violence that Ramji encounters in the 1990s.

MGV: Some parallels—you could say both happen in the US and involve American policies in the world. But if you were an American, unless you actually committed murder, there was a chance to rejoin society, and all was forgiven. But if you are from the outside, you're always an outsider because part of you belongs there; part of your loyalties, part of your concerns are about history in other parts of the world. I was also exploring the fact that when you lose community, when you lose the faith that held you so close to it, and you lose home, then what replaces all that? Political ideology, in the case of the character Ramji. But where does that take him? Basically to a no man's land.

SF: I was very touched by how Ramji at first is so secure in his religious faith. He is certain that this is the right way to live, and yet it falls away quite quickly once he is exposed to new ideas and new opportunities.

MGV: Yes, this was what all the excitement of the sixties and seventies was, to me at least. You come with the certainty that you know the secret of the universe, and that you are the chosen people, no matter how many of you there are. And then you find that there are many other sects and groups with that same certainty. Or they are offering you other ways of looking at things. There's the thrill of liberation and the agony of letting go. It's not easy to let go of a faith, which is not just a religious faith, but also involves your ethnic identity and the people you have grown up with, whom you saw every day, in school and in prayer houses and so on. It took a very, very long time to detach myself from

that. I would detach myself and then come back a little bit, move further away, and then come back—because you are drawn into it even by a song, by a hymn. I have a religious sensibility, but I don't believe in God. The sensibility doesn't go away. I understand the need for a faith and its comfort.

SF: When you talk about the Ismailis, you call them Shamsis. Is that simply an alternate word for Ismaili?

MGV: I made the Shamsis up, because part of my growing up in the US involved studying and reflecting upon the history of the Khoja Ismailis and the history of India, and the cultures and philosophies of India, and how they pertained to me. I realized that my tradition was very local—it was made up of very local Indian traditions and stories that come from a particular region.

SF: Gujarat?

MGV: Yes, a particular part of Gujarat—Cutch and Kathiawad in the northwest of Gujarat. So I started with what I had: Gujarati hymns, what we call ginans; I began to study them. They were our strongest emotional and psychological tie to India; they had that power because they are poetry. I also studied Sanskrit; I was interested in this ancient—to me, mythic—language. I wanted to see where I fitted in. And gradually I realized that in India there are many communities and sects. So, instead of the Khoja Ismaili community, I decided to use a slightly more generic one in my books, at least in terms of its history. I'm a fiction writer, not a historian. When I'm doing the research, I'm a historian, but when I'm writing I'm free to change details to suit my purpose. The real history of any community can be very complex, veiled in uncertainty, and filled with contradictions. A novel has no space for all of that. I called my community the Shamsis because it was a fictional community.

SF: One point you make, even in describing the very devout people in your novels, is that there is a lot of Hinduism mixed in with their faith.

MGV: That is their faith. This is because the sect is syncretistic, fusing Hindu (or traditional Indian) beliefs and customs with Muslim beliefs, and this is not so unknown in India. When I went to India recently, I visited [Hindu] temples where there were portraits of the Prophet Muhammad. To the people who worshipped there, the Prophet shared a common mythical lineage with Rama and Krishna. The people were a bit scared because the nationalists were trying to weed them out, purify them.

- SF: It seems to me this idea of syncretism is a very powerful theme in what you write, almost in resistance to the exclusionary aspects of nationhood.
- MGV: Nationhood, and also academic departments. South Asian departments can be very orthodox—this is Hinduism, this is Islam; this is India, this is Pakistan—when in fact the reality has been very complex, dynamic, and fluid, with wonderful contradictions. In Pakistan there are still writers who write about the gods and goddesses. I'm Indian by origin, but I've all these mixtures of faiths that have gone into my upbringing.
- SF: The central character in *Amriika*, Ramji, has a friend named Sona, who is very interested in the history of his faith and in medieval Indian literature.
- MGV: Yes, he represents my interests. I've used him in three books. He does similar things in *The Gunny Sack*, and then I have him writing letters to his teacher Mr. Fernandes in *The Book of Secrets*.
- SF: So, it seems that Ramji and Sona represent a kind of composite autobiographical figure?
- MGV: Yes, though in the *The Gunny Sack* I had two brothers who did that. One was Sona and the other was the narrator Kala. They represented both my sides: the Indian and the African. One was called dark or Kala, the other was called Sona, which means gold. But Sona then goes crazy and loses balance in his own way, and I suppose he represents the frustration that I sometimes feel when I see history being rewritten before my eyes as it were. Ideas that aren't comforting and are in the syncretistic tradition are erased in the interests of purification even by my own people. I had Sona vent some of my feelings about that.
- SF: Is Sona the one who writes those letters in *Amriika*?
- MGV: Yes.
- SF: You're not absolutely explicit about this in *Amriika*. It's just a fear on Ramji's part. But you felt this same frustration?
- MGV: Yes. The hate I focused on in the novel was very extreme. I took the manuscript of *Amriika* to some people and asked them, "Is this okay or not?" This was after the Rushdie affair, and I thought I sensed a nervousness in the publishers to use the word Islam on the book jacket. In the book I attempted to explore the diversity within Islam. The book is about being an Indian first and then a Muslim, and about being partly Hindu and partly Muslim—if one were to use these labels. My

- own community were never called Muslims historically; when I was a child, a “Muslim” meant an orthodox Sunni. We were called Khojas.
- SF: After 9/11 did you feel that there had been something uncannily prophetic about your own book?
- MGV: I met people in India who thought definitely it was. The irony is that in Canada that side of the book was never even mentioned; all that the reviewers saw was an immigrant, and why was he griping when he was doing so well? The idea of dissent somehow being connected to terrorism or fundamentalism—the Indian reviewers saw that immediately. But here, it was either the sixties or the immigrant thing.
- SF: It somehow suggests that an immigrant writer should deal only with themes of exile or diaspora and not with other big social themes, like what the 1960s meant to North American culture, or the instability of a world where terrorism seems a rational option to some people. But these are big themes. Why not tackle them?
- MGV: Yes, it’s so easy simply to pick on the immigrant theme and make a comment on it, or to pick on the sixties and say it’s been done, instead of actually dealing with the whole book. It’s lazy or opportunistic reviewing.
- SF: Of course, the 1960s have been written about by many authors, but I think *Amriika* is unique in that it shows how someone from another culture was affected.
- MGV: Exactly, yes. How someone who is from outside copes with the sixties and what it means to him. The Third World is still there, so the sixties doesn’t go away for us—the dissent, the whole thing about Vietnam, it is still present.
- SF: Especially with the disturbing parallels between American involvement in Vietnam and American involvement in other parts of the world now?
- MGV: It never went away. But the sixties radicals seem to have all become either right-wing or professors.
- SF: It seems to me that *Amriika* and *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall* share a structure. You might call it a confessional memoir; another term that comes to mind is the recuperative elegy. But in both novels there’s someone who is talking to us about his past. How do you see this parallel between the two novels?
- MGV: When I write about the past, the present always matters—who’s telling the story, from what perspective, how much can you really know about the past, the ambiguity and contradictions and the subjectivity

of history and memory. The idea of someone telling you a story about the past and being conscious of that, that he's remembering and gathering and giving shape—it's not someone standing outside it, an omniscient narrator—that is very important for me.

SF: It seems that in both books there is an element of confession. Both people feel that they have done wrong in their past, and that one way of expiating this wrong is to tell their story.

MGV: Yes, although in *Amriika* I didn't see Ramji as doing too great a wrong; he simply had no choice at the end. He followed his conscience, was not an extremist, hated no one—but he met people who were all of these. And he was caught. He found himself harbouring a bomber, a killer. The alternative for him was to follow the middle-class way; but he was a man of the sixties with Africa in his heart.

SF: Just to go back to this question of guilt—you are saying in a way that Ramji has no choice. At times I felt that Vikram Lall had no choice about the things that he does. They are wrong. He participates in bribery, corruption, all sorts of things, but. . .

MGV: He had no choice in a different way. He does what is expected of him, or what most men would have done—go along with the corruption. For Ramji, part of his problem is that he doesn't belong anywhere. He doesn't have moral or ethical certainty. Vikram Lall at least knows that something is wrong. For Ramji, the question of right and wrong is not simple. After all, yesterday's terrorists are today's heroes, they even win Nobel Prizes.

SF: Exactly. Not only at the personal level are they confused about, say, their faith or what a moral act ought to be, but also they live in a world in which monsters become heroes.

MGV: And you feel you have to take a stand or support something, except when it comes to murder, but by then it's too late. So where do you stop?

SF: I'd like to talk about the character Njoroge in *Vikram Lall* who is a Kikuyu and he, in a way, seems to support the Mau Mau. For him, the Mau Mau are not the terrible murderers of the Bruce family; they are brave freedom fighters.

MGV: But I don't think he supports the murders as much as understands them. He knows where they come from and he will explain one murder with another murder. So Vikram Lall in that sense has a greater moral certainty. He can say these were my friends and they were killed and

that's all he knows. But Njoroge—he thinks more like Ramji. It was war, the Bruce family was killed; but look at the thousands of Africans who died, including children in the same circumstances, butchered or hacked to death. It's Vikram, the unethical or corrupt man, who actually feels the pain of murder.

SF: Some critics have commented that there is an absence of black Africans in your fiction, but black Africans are very prominent and significant characters in *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall*. Did you deliberately foreground the black characters in that novel?

MGV: No. *The Gunny Sack* also has important African characters. But you know, the whole thing between black and white is quite superficial because Africa is not just black; it's many different peoples. And Ngugi's [Ngugi wa Thiongo] novels deal with black Africans, many of them Kikuyu. You could say there is an absence of non-Kikuyu people in his novels. But that's not fair. As a writer you work with your own understanding and your own world, however you define it. Think of Hardy or Joyce. How local they were. Think of Robertson Davies . . .

SF: Sometimes you identify yourself as an African writer. Your books are actually catalogued in the African section of the library here. Is there some useful significance in that label? Are there African qualities in your work that distinguish it from, say, the work of a Caribbean writer who might also share Indian ancestry?

MGV: I come from there, I have vivid memories of there, I have a visceral response to the sounds of Africa; I speak the language of there. I am drawn to write about it because I know the place. I care about what happens there. I have Swahili rhythms in my language. I feel instinctively that the way I speak my Indian language is not the same way it is spoken in Gujarat. Whether there's an Africanness to my work, or Canadianness or Indianness, and what percentage, or whether it's Hindu or Muslim, or Shiah or Sunni, or Tanzanian or Kenyan, I leave for academic census-takers to determine.

SF: You speak Cutchi?

MGV: Cutchi and Gujarati. I also speak Swahili and English, and some Hindi.

SF: Was there ever any question that you might write in one of these other languages?

MGV: No. I was not trained formally in those languages; I spoke Swahili as a child but studied it at a formal level rather late. Now, of course, the people who go through the school system in Tanzania know it much

better, the literary Swahili. Recently I have translated a story of mine into Swahili. This gave me a lot of pleasure, although it took a lot of time. I don't know how good the translation is, but I did feel that I could capture the voice, and for me the first thing in a translation is that the voice should be there.

SF: I noticed how easily your characters move from Swahili into one of the Indian languages and then into English. I assume you work very hard to find ways to introduce these other languages without ever having to translate, so that your readers feel that they understand it?

MGV: I use the words and phrases in a way that I can understand myself, so the language feels natural, but I'm not translating. There's a technique to it—saying something another way, using repetition, or giving half the sense in one language and half the sense in another language; but basically maintaining the rhythm and continuity is essential.

SF: I didn't discover until I got to the end of *No New Land* that there was a glossary. I think *Book of Secrets* has a glossary too. Was having a glossary your idea or the editor's?

MGV: It was my idea because I'm interested in languages and I like to know the origins of words. There's an overlap between Swahili and some Indian words, because they have a common origin in Arabic. Take, for example, *safari*, the Swahili word. In Gujarati it would be *safar*, and in Arabic I think it is similar. And *safari* is now also an English word. It is all so fascinating. Language travels as people do.

SF: The Punjabi Canadian-American writer Shauna Singh Baldwin has refused to have any glossaries in her books.

MGV: Initially, you were *compelled* to have a glossary and to italicize, and then Rushdie came along and he didn't do it. So everybody said, "We don't have to do it!" But I enjoy doing it sometimes, and I feel the need because I like to explore words and their relationships to peoples and places, and their histories. I think that at this stage, in the literary world we are living in, it is a matter of choice whether to use italics or not, whether to have a glossary at the end or not. It's not really an argument any more, we all are much more secure. There are no metropolitan censors any more.

SF: How do you think your studies in Sanskrit and Indian literature have affected your writing in English? Do you think that it has entered stylistically and thematically into what you do?

MGV: I'm not conscious of that. The study of Sanskrit and medieval Gujarati gave me a sense of the flexibility and fluidity of language over regions and over time. It helped me to place myself in the historical Indian culture. Obviously there are certain ways of saying things which would be Indian. Often I forget whether it's Indian or Swahili idiom I am using. Sometimes it's both at the same time. So, instead of saying "Do you think that. . ." we would say, "So you think. . ." in Swahili and in Cutchi.

SF: You have said elsewhere, in your piece in the book *Passages*, that you don't see yourself as "afflicted by nostalgia," but it seems to me that there are strong nostalgic elements in *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall*.

MGV: I think nostalgia is a very strong permanent sense of loss and longing devoid of any reality about time past. I don't have that. But every time summer comes along, for example, I recall the times when I was a teenager in Dar es Salaam—the Beatles songs and the Bee Gees and the excitement and nervousness about the future. But that doesn't mean I want to go back there and not be what I am now. I don't want to return and live in a two-room flat with eight other people, though those times had extremely happy moments, made me into what I am. You can indulge in nostalgia if you want to, or you can make a character feel it or simply see it. Or you can bring alive the past to show how historical time and historical events affect personal lives. It may be that in the West one is used to reading about unhappy childhoods—the influence of Freud perhaps—and we read all the time about gruesome crimes against children. But childhood has very happy moments even in the most constrained circumstances. My childhood had some very terrifying moments, in terms of insecurity in my home; my mother was a single mother. But I would not trade that childhood with the stable but boring middle-class experiences that I often see here.

SF: The evocation of Vikram Lall's childhood friendship with the two Bruce children in some ways is a very harmonious, appealing picture of a childhood Eden even though there is this very dark shadow of violence.

MGV: There is the conflict between Mahesh Uncle and the other uncles. There is the unhappiness of the Partition—the shadow of Partition on the family. So the unhappiness is there, but it's not all-consuming,

especially for a child. Even now, if you go to India or you go to Africa, at eight o' clock in the morning you see children happily, innocently traipsing off to school; they play games; marriages take place with full ceremonial processions; young men tease old codgers in the market . . . it's not all hunger and AIDS.

SF: When Vikram is a young man, it is just after independence, and there is a lot in the book about the optimism in Kenya and about what a great country it could be, and that this could be Africa's century. It seems so poignant because that's not what happened.

MGV: Yes, I feel strongly about that—the dream of Africa, to build a United States of Africa, an East African Federation. And it all disappeared in a really miserable fashion, was stolen away.

SF: Do you have any sense of why those dreams didn't materialize?

MGV: Well, I think the countries, especially Tanzania, were not prepared. The university had just been started after independence, you didn't have a trained civil service. The sense of citizenship, of the public good, had not developed. The British left the country in a bankrupt state. And then there were the historical forces—tribal rivalries, which came into play in Kenya, and the Cold War, when the smaller countries were manipulated, bribed, blackmailed. I think that with internal instabilities, and unpreparedness, and external pressures, the countries simply had no hope.

SF: In *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall*, there are quite a few interracial relationships. The central one between Njoroge and Deepa ends very badly. You sense from the outset that it is an impossible relationship. But there are other relationships that do endure. I'm thinking of the odd relationship between Janice and Mungai. Is there an allegorical dimension to their relationship?

MGV: I don't know. I just imagined this out-of-the-way place where a person might forget the world. It is a sanctuary where I thought Vikram Lall might actually like to be, where he could hide away. It is a kind of Eden, although it's a very uncomfortable place, physically. But it's also in a sense Africa, the forest, and the animals, and the night, so I suppose I was trying to capture that. There was another relationship in the book between an Indian and a Masai woman. There were many more of those relationships than we were told about, especially between the Punjabi railroad workers and women of the Masai and the Nandi tribes.

SF: It seems at some point there really was a potential for an integrated, multicultural society.

MGV: In the early part of the century, yes, even on the coast of East Africa. There were lots of intermarriages or second wives because a Muslim society allowed that. But after the thirties and forties, social taboos started coming into place, and then we saw the new generation as “chotaras” or half-castes. They were looked down upon. They were the poorest among the Asians.

SF: At the end of *Vikram Lall* we learn that his father, who’s now a widower, is living with an African woman who provides him with comfort and company at the end of his life. I saw that as hopeful. Is that how you meant it?

MGV: Yes, because I think at this stage in Kenya those taboos don’t really exist. If they exist, they do so only in the memories of some people. There’s resentment against the Asians by some Africans, especially the educated ones, because colonial memories have not died completely. But among the Asians that I saw, I didn’t see that kind of racism; there was pride in being African, and even having Masai antecedents.

SF: Critics of Canadian writing are perhaps apt to put all the writers of South Asian extraction together, so you and Neil Bissoondath and Rohinton Mistry and Michael Ondaatje and so forth get viewed as a group. But is this just a misconception on the part of people who see that you all look Indian and assume that therefore you share certain things? Do you feel that you are part of a coherent group based on South Asian ancestry?

MGV: Well, I don’t know. There is an awareness of each other because you are lumped together. Here the racial configurations are very different from where I came from. Blackness means something special. Because of that, a person who is black but who has never been to Africa in three hundred years is suddenly more African than I am. But I suppose if you are going to make those divisions, then South Asians would have a certain kind of ancestral affinity with each other. I feel closer to people in India than to South Asians from the Caribbean. When I go to India, I can speak the language. We were more in contact—East Africa and India—than the Caribbean and India were.

SF: The contacts between East Africa and India go back a long way, don’t they?

MGV: Yes, plus they've also been constant. I had an uncle who was born in Africa. He might even have been part African, his features seemed to indicate that. But he worked in the customs, and because this was a government job, he received paid "home leave" every four years, and he would go to India. Because that was "home"!

SF: You yourself have been to India?

MGV: I've been there many times now. When I first visited in 1993, I really had the shock of my life because I thought I was going to a very alien place, and it turned out to be not as alien as I had expected. It seemed familiar! People treated me like I was one of them; I would walk down the streets and understand the goings-on. No one asked me where I came from. At Delhi railway stations the touts would assume that I must be from Bombay because I didn't speak like them! And I could speak to them with a familiarity that I found surprising. There was an ancestral memory and experience which I could now partake of. This brought a whole new dimension to my existence. That first trip was a mixture of shock at this discovery, and at the same time I was really touched by how familiarly I was treated, and then shocked again by the violence then in progress in several cities. I came in very close proximity to communal riots—people being butchered and women raped. A kind of violence and hatred that was out of my experience altogether. That visit was moving in every way—pleasure, at the same time shock at the violence, shock at my own response to it. That violence seemed to affect me personally.

SF: At one point I think you were planning to write a travel book about India.

MGV: I'm planning, but every time a novel takes me off in another direction. I have notes for it. I have done more travelling and research, but somehow a new novel comes along and I cannot get my head out of it.

SF: You are the only Canadian author to have won two Giller prizes, but perhaps people still regard you as exotic. Do you have any sense of how you are perceived by the wider reading audience in Canada?

MGV: I've been to readings recently in small towns in Ontario and treated extremely well in the sense of enthusiastic audiences—full houses—and people buying books. I cannot write about Ontario in a way that a person with roots in Ontario would identify with completely. But at the same time, to compensate for that, I have an audience in India and an international audience that has an interest in India and Africa. And

in Canada I've found that people are quite happy with the fact that I am a Canadian writing about different places. Canada has changed dramatically in the last fifteen or twenty years. It was unthinkable to write a book like *Vikram Lall* in 1984 and have it accepted. I don't feel an alien. It's not just me; people have changed. Canadians recognize that this is a country with people who come from different places, and they are happy with that. That's how I see it. I don't know if I'm growing old or perhaps, because I won two Giller prizes, I've become complacent. In the eighties, I was very militant, in a literary sense. I started an alternative literary magazine and I took shots at the mainstream. I don't think I've turned complacent. I do feel that Canadians are very different from what they were twenty years ago. Wherever you go, they seem to be happy with the diversity of the nation. That's what defines Canada for me.

SF: You have quite a wide readership in India?

MGV: I've given readings at universities there. Also I get reviewed there and I get published there by a major publisher. I've been interviewed—had some bad and some good interviews in India—so I think I'm recognized there as a writer of Indian origin.

SF: So you are not dependent solely on a Canadian readership?

MGV: No, but the Canadian readership is very important. It's the biggest, it's the most supportive, and it gives me the strength with which I can actually go overseas. So I'm really. . . well, grateful is an easy word to say, but I feel fortunate. I feel fortunate that I have the support in this country that actually allows me to go outside of Canada and therefore also represent it without denying my history or heritage.

NOTES

- 1 The epigraph of *Anriika* is taken from Walt Whitman's "Facing West from California's Shores":

Facing west from California's shores,

. . . .

I, a child, very old, over waves, towards the house of
maternity, the land of migrations, look afar,

Look off the shores of my Western sea, the circle almost circled;

. . . .

Now I face home again, very pleas'd and joyous,
(But where is what I started for so long ago?
And why is it yet unfound?)