

Gendered Spatial Politics and the Limits of Representation in M. G. Vassanji's Fictions

Bompi Riba

Department of English
Rajiv Gandhi University
Rono Hills, Doimukh

Abstract:

Home is rarely the neutral shelter it claims to be. In M. G. Vassanji's fiction it is arguably least neutral where women are concerned. This paper attempts to read *The Gunny Sack* (1989), *No New Land* (1991), *The Book of Secrets* (1994), *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall* (2003), *The Assassin's Song* (2007), and *The Magic of Saida* (2012) through feminist cultural geography — particularly Doreen Massey's sense of space as social relations and Alison Blunt and Robyn Dowling's account of home as at once material, imagined, and felt. The paper also discusses how the gendered spatial politics begins in the community's founding Sufi myth and they also echo through the domestic architecture, food practices, and the inherited division between home and the outside world. It will also discuss how the African women in these novels are eroticised and largely silenced and are made to stand in for the land itself. Read against Lisa Lau's notion of “re-orientalism,” this suggests that Vassanji, in the act of carving out a distinct South Asian East African identity, ends up repeating some of the same exoticising gestures that colonial discourse once used on the Orient.

Keywords: Diaspora, East African Indian Fiction, Feminist Geography, Gendered Space, Home, M. G. Vassanji.

Introduction: Gendering the Idea of Home

Home is usually described as a centre — the place a person returns to, the fixed point against which everything else is measured. Looked at closely, though, that description turns out to be a fairly masculine one. Feminist geographers have pointed out for decades that the comforting idea of home depends on women's labour and, often, their confinement: women sustain domestic space as unpaid and largely unacknowledged workers even while being idealised as its spiritual heart. This contradiction is observed in the fictions of the East African Indian writer, M. G. Vassanji, whose novels keep returning to the question of what home can possibly mean for a community displaced twice over — first from India, and then, after decolonisation, from East Africa itself.

Across *The Gunny Sack*, *No New Land*, *The Book of Secrets*, *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall*, *The Assassin's Song*, and *The Magic of Saida*, Vassanji's the Shamsi community builds home out of myth, food, religious habit, and inherited memory. Almost without exception, it is women who are cast as the community's torch-bearers — keepers of tradition, cuisine, and ancestral belief — and almost without exception they are denied, in return, authorship, mobility, and voice. This paradox can be observed across four registers: the community's founding myth, the domestic architecture that separates inside from

outside, the everyday politics of food, and, more uncomfortably, the way African women are represented at all. On the last point in particular, Vassanji's fiction is not as innocent as its sympathy for women's suffering might suggest. This can be verified with reference to Lisa Lau's "re-orientalism" (571) which explains the reproduction of orientalist habits of mind not by Western observers but by diasporic Asian writers themselves.

The Founding Myth: Gendered Space in *The Assassin's Song*

It is worth starting where Vassanji himself starts: with myth. In *The Assassin's Song*, Karsan Dargawalla cannot understand why the temple of Rupa Devi — wife of the community's founding Sufi, Pir Bawa — sits not inside the Pirbaag, the garden-shrine at the heart of Shamsi life, but in a low, deserted spot some distance off. Myths are usually where a community keeps its origin story and its authority for believing what it believes, and in inventing this Sufi myth Vassanji is deliberately staging the liminal, syncretic position of a community modelled on the historical Khoja Ismailis (Riba). But something else is being staged too, almost incidentally: a spatial hierarchy of gender, written directly into the sacred landscape. According to the myth, King Devija gives his daughter Rupa Devi in marriage to the Pir on the condition that he give her a home — and yet it is the king, not the Pir, who actually supplies the land, and the garden the couple builds together comes to be known only as the Pir's garden, the Pirbaag, never Rupa Devi's. That small erasure fits what Linda McDowell calls the construction of home as "the locus of love, emotion and empathy" (qtd. in Blunt and Dowling 18), a construction that in practice hands women the unpaid, largely invisible work of nurture. Rupa Devi tends the garden her husband assigns her, which lines up neatly with I. M. Young's distinction between "building" a house — coded masculine — and "cultivating" a home, coded feminine and, not coincidentally, undervalued (qtd. in Blunt and Dowling 4-5). She dies in childbirth after the king threatens to take the land back unless the marriage produces an heir; the community remembers her, but her temple stays at the margins, while Priyanti, the courtesan who later causes the Pir's fall, becomes the myth's other woman, its cautionary tale. Between them, Rupa Devi and Priyanti give the community its founding template of submissive virtue on one side and punished desire on the other.

There is something almost literal here about Doreen Massey's claim that "the spatial is social relations 'stretched out'" (*Space, Place and Gender*, 2): the temple's location does not just reflect the community's gender hierarchy but keeps reproducing it, year after year, pilgrim after pilgrim. Shirley Ardener in her "Ground Rules and Social Maps for Women: An Introduction", makes a related point — that a woman's place in a social or genealogical "map" need not be a literal location at all; it can be metaphysical, defined by her relation to father, husband, and other men, even while she holds real authority over other women and children inside the household (*Women and Space*, 14). What the Sufi myth offers, in other words, is a template that recurs throughout Vassanji's fiction: women anchor the sacred and domestic order of the community while owning almost none of the space they are said to sanctify.

Inside and Outside: The Architecture of Domestic Hierarchy

The same gendered logic shows up again, this time in bricks and floor plans, in *The Assassin's Song* (2007). Karsan's father has a library, a room for contemplation and intellectual authority; his mother has a kitchen. Blunt and Dowling would call this division "geographically and historically specific" (19) rather than natural. Karsan's mother, Madhu, sends her son to bring milk and almonds to his father in the library; she

herself never sets foot in it. Day after day, the layout of the house quietly repeats the same lesson: mind over body, father over mother.

That hierarchy gets complicated because the boundary between the private household and the public shrine next to it is quite porous. A devotee like Shilpa drifts between the pavilion, where the Saheb receives his followers, and the family kitchen, making tea and warm milk with the ease of someone who belongs there — which leaves the family very little room to keep its own domestic life private. It is inside this compromised space that Madhu feels most alone, especially once she starts noticing how physically close Shilpa and her husband have become. Her one escape is disguise: she puts on a burkha to slip off to the cinema, and in that strange reversal becomes invisible in order to feel, for once, like herself — occupying what amounts to an in-between space of visibility and invisibility, though even that turns out to depend on her husband's quiet permission. When she finally says the unsayable out loud, rebuking her husband in front of the assembled devotees, she is declared mad and sent home to her father, and the novel makes clear that this return is no comfort: “What Indian woman in those times returned home from her husband's to be welcomed and loved? ... the poor victim set foot inside at her own peril” (Vassanji, *Assassin's Song* 338). Madhu's story is a reminder that home, for the women in these novels, is rarely just a refuge. More often it is a place of surveillance and quiet conflict, where resistance, when it does surface, gets relabelled as illness.

Home, Violence, and the Discourse of Madness

One pattern that recurs across the novels is the pairing of domestic violence with the language of madness — as if the two always arrived together. In *The Magic of Saida* (2012), Saida inherits her grandfather's role as healer, and from childhood is more or less locked in his room, unable to leave. Her later marriage to the powerful *mganga* Abdalla puts her under what she herself, tellingly, describes as a kind of panopticon gaze — a watchfulness that keeps her braced for violence long before it happens. When she has a child outside the marriage, her mother and husband conspire to kill the infant, and Abdalla formally divorces her by pronouncing “talaka” (298) three times, which fixes her, in terms Foucault would recognise, in a state of permanent visibility as a fallen woman— a warning, essentially, to every other woman in the community.

A starker case still is Mariamu, in *The Book of Secrets* (1994). Her community explains her behaviour — rage at her mother, a flinching refusal to be touched by her stepfather Rashid — as possession by a shetani. Read from outside that belief system, it looks much more like the aftermath of sexual abuse. The colonial administrator Alfred Corbin's journal records an exorcism in which Mariamu, beaten and dishevelled, is made to answer an exorcist's questions, and her conversation with Corbin points plainly toward her stepfather rather than any spirit. She is later found, on her wedding night, not to be a virgin; she is publicly shamed for it, and neither her mother nor her uncle steps in to defend her. Her eventual violent death is never solved. Jane Ussher's account of how women's distress gets read as madness rather than treated as a reasonable response to trauma in her *The Madness of Women: Myth and Experience* fits Mariamu closely (122). Her madness looks less like a symptom than a survival strategy, and what actually forecloses her chance at justice is not any instability in her but her community's refusal to look at its own complicity.

Taken together, Saida and Mariamu make a case that feminist geography has made in more abstract terms: home is not gender-neutral ground, but a site where kinship itself can excuse violence — where a spiritual or psychiatric explanation conveniently displaces attention from the much more mundane conditions, economic dependency, restricted mobility, family silence, that actually make the violence possible.

Gastro-Politics: Food, Nostalgia, and the Burden of Cultural Custodianship

Violence represents the most extreme expression of this pattern. Food, by contrast, is its everyday manifestation and perhaps the more revealing one, as it demonstrates how women come to bear the burden of cultural continuity through practices that appear, on the surface, to be nothing more than the preparation of daily meals. Arjun Appadurai's in his "Gastro-Politics in Hindu South Asia", discusses — food as a "powerful semiotic device" (494) for conflict and identity. This analogy is relevant particularly with reference to the immigrant apartment building at the centre of *No New Land* (1991), where Gulshan Bai, Sheru Mama, and their neighbours rebuild, floor by floor, something like the village they left behind in Dar es Salaam. There is an echo of Partha Chatterjee's argument that a colonised nation offloads its spirituality onto women, whose care of home and cuisine becomes a kind of stand-in nationalism (*Culinary Fictions: Food in South Asian Diasporic Culture*. 34); their cooking amounts to what Anita Mannur calls "culinary citizenship" (29), even as it embarrasses their children — Fatima, for one, who dreads that her mother's chapatti-selling will mark her out at school.

Food can wound as well as comfort. The mocking song of "Chapati Banyani," sung by an African character dismissed as mad in *The Gunny Sack*, is what Dan Ojwang calls a "food-insult" (*Reading Migration* 74) — African resentment of Indian exclusivity, voiced through diet. And in *No New Land*, Nurdin Lalani's guilty taste for pork says something about his own sense of displacement, since eating what is forbidden is, in Shamsi belief, a first step toward "godlessness" and toward becoming "them," the Canadians (127). Running through all of this is Zera Lalani, who faces down Christian proselytisers and brings in a cleric from Dar es Salaam to keep the community on the moral straight and narrow. She is at once the last line of defence against assimilation and, not without irony, one of the strongest reinforcers of the patriarchal order that limits her. Her vigilance buys her real authority at home — which is really the point: some women gain power in these novels precisely by doubling down on patriarchy rather than resisting it.

The Home/World Dichotomy and the Limits of Belonging

Partha Chatterjee's old distinction between ghar (home, spiritual, feminine) and bahir (world, material, masculine) fits Sheila, Vikram's mother in *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall*, almost too well. Her small shrine of Hindu deities, her devotion to the radio broadcasts of the Ramayana, her insistence on raising her children "as Indians, as Hindus" (227) — all of it marks her as the keeper of a spiritual home that her husband's more pragmatic dealings with Kenyan politics never touch. And yet Sheila insists, when her gardener Mwangi asks pointedly, "Are we really Africans?" (102), that Kenya really is home to Indians. That claim rests on what Kim Dovey calls "the dialectics of appropriation" (47) — home as something claimed through time and lived experience rather than simply inherited — and it sits alongside the wider community's borrowing of African dress, language, and food (Khan and Kalamani 113, 118) as further evidence that East Africa has, in some real if contested sense, become home.

But that claim to belonging has its own fine print. Sheila will not accept her daughter Deepa's marriage to the African Njoroge, and her reasons are unambiguous: fear of what the community will say, and a longing for grandchildren she can “understand” and raise “in our ways” (227). So the home/world split does not really dissolve here so much as move house: tucked inside Sheila's version of home is a second, narrower boundary, this one between acceptable and unacceptable kin.

“A Woman's Place”: Labour, Economy, and the Limits of Female Power

Underneath the myth and the food and the architecture sits something more basic: an economy. In *The Gunny Sack*, the healer Ji Bai has lost even her own name — Mongi, her birth name, is replaced by an honorific that records only her obedient reply to her father, “Ji, ha” — and her life is shaped by a marriage arranged at thirteen and enforced, from then on, by threats and correction. Kulsum, her daughter-in-law, spends years being blamed for not conceiving before she finally rebels — sneaking off to the cinema during prayer time, going on hunger strike — and eventually builds a successful business of her own as a dukkawalla. But her success, and later Roshan Mattress's, comes at a narrative cost: both women are described as unfeminine, even grotesque, right at the point where they become independent, which suggests the novels' sympathy for enterprising women only goes so far before an older anxiety about women in male economic territory kicks back in. Blunt and Dowling's phrase for home as “a space of social reproduction” of labour (11) fits neatly: the unpaid work of women like Ji Bai and Moti is exactly what Dhanji Govindji credits, without any apparent irony, for his own business success — he compares his daughters-in-law to the goddess Lakshmi — while declining, of course, to pay them for it.

African Concubines, Wives, and Lovers: Home, Race, and the Question of Re-Orientalism

This is where the argument gets harder to make comfortably, because it concerns how African women are written at all. In *The Gunny Sack*, the Indian pioneer Dhanji Govindji's arrival in East Africa is described in openly sexual terms: “Where Africa opened its womb to India and produced a being who forever stalks the forest in search of himself. It is where Bibi Taratibu, given as a gift for cold nights, was so used and discarded, and then disappeared” (Vassanji, *Gunny Sack* 45). Africa is feminised and eroticised here in a way that, oddly, inverts the familiar postcolonial figure of “Mother India”: the homeland turns masculine, and it is the African “other” who is feminised, used, and discarded. Bibi Taratibu, Dhanji Govindji's concubine and the mother of his son Huseni, is never given a physical description, an inner life, or a history of her own in the novel. She functions almost entirely as a vessel for telling the community's origin story from an Indian, masculine point of view — what Dan Ojwang calls “the original contact” between settlers and natives, a contact the community later prefers to forget (*Reading Migration* 118).

The pattern is not a one-off. Hamida, Kamal's African mother in *The Magic of Saida*, is left with her son and then dismissed by his Indian relatives with the offhand line, “your mother has no need for you now” (186). Sakina dadi in *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall*, born Maasai, is absorbed so completely into Punjabi domestic life that when her own son returns to perform a Maasai dance for her, the family is embarrassed rather than moved. And Khanoum, the African wife of mukhi Jamali in *The Book of Secrets*, is dropped by the very community she served for decades the moment her husband dies — which provokes one of the few moments in these novels where an African woman speaks for herself, angrily and at length: “Does this black self lessen in value now that its brown partner is gone?” (197). Even then, though, her

words reach us only because the community happened to record them, not because the narrative was built to give her a voice in the first place.

Edward Said's account of Orientalism describes a discourse that gave the West authority to describe, teach, and effectively rule over “the Orient” (3). Lisa Lau's re-orientalism describes something related but stranger: diasporic Asian writers reproducing those same exoticising habits, but now from a position of relative power over the cultures they are writing about (571-72). It is hard, on this evidence, not to place Vassanji within that pattern. In building a distinct Shamsi, Asian-African identity, he keeps returning to the African continent — and to African women specifically — through the same exoticising, silencing moves that colonial writers once used on the Orient. Saida herself, in *The Magic of Saida*, exists almost entirely as Kamal remembers and wants her; her eventual madness and mysterious death leave her, like Mariamu and Bibi Taratibu before her, without a story that is really hers. Vassanji ends up in an odd double position — insider and outsider to Africa at once, speaking for a continent that his own fiction rarely lets speak for itself.

Conclusion

Viewed together, myth, architecture, food, economy, and race compose a strikingly consistent pattern. Throughout Vassanji's fiction, women hold the home together symbolically without holding any real claim to it: they are its spiritual custodians and moral anchors, yet they are given no ownership, no authorship, and little voice in the spaces they are asked to sustain. Even their resistance is rarely allowed to mean what it means—it gets reinterpreted, as madness in some women and as a failure of femininity in others, rather than taken on its own terms. African women fare worse still, seldom rising above the level of symbol; more often than not they stand in for the land itself rather than existing as characters with lives of their own. The result is a body of fiction genuinely, at times movingly, critical of patriarchal domesticity within the Shamsi diaspora—and yet, in its treatment of African women, guilty of the same silencing it elsewhere seems intent on exposing. Home, in Vassanji's East Africa, never settles into one fixed thing; it is continually built and unbuilt, and who is allowed to speak, move, and be believed within it keeps coming back to the same two axes: gender and race.

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