

## **Fluidity of Positionality : Connotations of Space and modifying Political Ideology**

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The novelistic use of space, whether it is an actual geographical location or a fictitious place created by the writer, is always ideological. It projects the socio-cultural nuances of a community and the power-politics that shape its identity. The history of a nation lies in its relationship to the land that it has possessed or (dis)possessed. Hence, the history of imperialism is intricately involved with appropriation of geographical space and the subsequent political power over the material, mineral and human resources that lie within that territory. Consequently, place becomes a testimony to the history of a race as possession of geographical space changes hands from one racial group to another and subsequently causes the association with place to be (re)negotiated. In the postcolonial and postmodern period of personal narratives and fragmented histories, the narration of geographical space becomes all the more vital since it also defines the location of cultural space.

Diasporic literature is imbued with descriptions of place in the narratives privileging homelands and the nostalgia of the life that was lived then. Commenting on the significance of space, Jasbir Jain states, "History unfolds itself through constructions of space .... Space provides in itself a

dynamics for history."<sup>1</sup> Evidently, a negotiation of memories of the homeland is intricately related to a description of location that defines the social 'positionality' (Linda Alcoff, 1988) of the individual. Frantz Fanon in his essay "Concerning Violence" comments, "The colonial world is a world cut in two."<sup>2</sup> (FF, p. 269), and specifically bisects it into the world of the settlers and that of the natives. By inference, we can assume that between these two lies the buffer zone of the middlemen, who belong neither to the race of the settlers nor to the race of the natives. Fanon further describes the polarized identity of the two,

The settler's town is a well-fed town, an easygoing town; its belly is always full of good things. The settler's town is a town of white people, of foreigners. ...

The native town is a hungry town, starved of bread, of meat, of shoes, of coal, of light.<sup>3</sup>

In *The Gunny Sack*, M.G. Vassanji describes the location of the living quarters of the Europeans, Asians and Africans in Dar-es-Salaam, and the space occupied by each race itself defines their socio-political positioning :

As you approach [Dar es Salaam] from the sea, as you enter the harbor, you see to the right all those beautiful, white buildings of the Europeans.... The dainty houses with red roofs, all laid out cleanly with gardens and servants looking out. Behind this beautiful, white European face of the town is our modest Indian district, every community in its own separate quarter, and behind that the African quarter going right into the forest.<sup>4</sup>

The comment "every community in its own separate quarter" very precisely defines the exclusivity of each community as far as the others are concerned, as well as the racial tensions reflected in the positioning of these three groups. The Europeans occupy the privileged location near the sea with the Africans relegated to the hinterlands, almost receding into the forest. The Asians, being neither the colonizers nor the colonized, occupy the space between the two. Being the middlemen, the traders, they inhabit a world that is 'in-between': they are not a part of the Europeans' world and the Africans do not belong to their world, whether it is geographical space, social intercourse, cultural communion, or political ideology. The location

in the middle also contributes to an ambiguity in their allegiance – who do they owe commitment to? Is it to the Africans or to the Europeans? Do the Asians sympathize with the cause of the Africans or do they support the imperialism of the Europeans? The consequence is that theirs is a pretentious position where they are not acknowledged by the Europeans with whom they would like to align themselves, and they do not in their turn acknowledge the Africans who would have aligned themselves with them. They thus occupy the position of *Trishanku*, a Hindu mythical figure, hanging between two worlds and belonging to neither of them. In his novel, *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall*, M.G.Vassanji describes the ambivalence in this psychological ‘middle’ space of the Asian in a self-analysis by the protagonist Vikram Lall as he considers his relationship to his two school friends, the African Njoroge and the British Bill:

There was a depth to [Njoroge] that I could not reach, could never fathom even when we became close. Just as there was a mystery and depth to Bill and his Englishness... I couldn't help feeling that both Bill and Njoroge were genuine, in their very different ways; only I, who stood in the middle, Vikram Lall, cherished son of an Indian grocer, sounded false to myself, rang hollow like a bad penny.<sup>5</sup>

In the collection *Uhuru Street*, a cycle of short stories by M.G.Vassanji, the stories deal with the ‘positionality’ of the Asian vis-à-vis the European and the African. M.G. Vassanji presents the in-between world of South Asians. Living in their cushioned space in East Africa, the Asians admire and ape the Europeans and pretend to ignore the off-hand patronizing behavior of the British. Though they themselves have suffered colonization at the hands of the British in India, yet they seem not to remember their own indignities because in East Africa it is the Africans who bear the brunt of colonization. In fact, the native suffers a double colonization, one at the hands of his White masters and the other at the hands of the Indian middleman. In Africa, the Indians become the abettors of the White rulers in exploiting the African though, at the same time, sympathizing with his ‘disadvantaged’ position. The colonial / postcolonial perspective of the Indians with regard to the British and then the colonial / postcolonial perspective of the Africans with regard to the Indians is explored in *Uhuru Street*,

before and after the change in the political ideology of Africa with its independence. The difference lies in the quiet acceptance of the British by the Indians on African soil versus the simmering hostility by which the Indians are regarded by the Africans as the 'baniyani', the merchant class, who lives off them without being the colonisers. The short story cycle starts with the pre-independence period in Africa and goes on to present the change in attitude and 'positionality' of the Indians and the Africans vis-à-vis each other as decolonization and independence comes to East Africa. Here the in-between world of the Asians changes from the semi-advantaged position between the Europeans and the Africans to the disadvantaged position vis-à-vis the newly independent Africans, with the Europeans discreetly moving away from the scene. Fanon describes decolonization in the following terms,

Decolonization is quite simply the replacing of a certain "species" of men by another "species" of men. Without any period of transition, there is a total, complete, and absolute substitution.<sup>6</sup>

He further adds that "decolonization is always a violent phenomenon."<sup>7</sup> In the case of East Africa, the Europeans quietly drew away, leaving the Indians to face the now independent and belligerent Africans. Hence, the Indians become the scapegoat for venting their pent up anger and frustration, targets of violence and revenge, as the Africans see them as the abettors of the Europeans and as a race who kept themselves aloof from the Africans.

The present paper proposes to take up two stories, "Ali" and "What Good Times We Had", from M.G.Vassanji's collection of short stories, *Uhuru Street*, the first being from the colonial period and the second from the post-colonial period. The second/third generation of Indians/Asians consider the secondary space of their parents' adopted land as their primary space, i.e. their homeland, because they were born and bred there. However, with the independence of Africa, they are made to realize that they had only appropriated the land: it does not belong to them since they never accepted social integration with the Africans. They had always remained a distinct community, a closed class structure, unwilling to change or assimilate. The two short stories under consideration project the 'positioning' of the South Asians and explore the intra-racial tensions between the two

communities, consequent to a total reversal of power-structure that becomes evident with the change in their political circumstances.

The story "Ali" is about an African servant by the same name, who works for an Asian family. The story is interesting in the way it juxtaposes British values with those of the Indians or the Africans in matters of attire, of cleanliness and of general behavior and holds up the Europeans as the standard model for everything. The Asian children are reprimanded at school because the British standards of impeccably ironed clean clothes are not met with, but, in contrast to this, is the dirty, unkempt Ali coming straight from the village – his clothes in tatters, shirt without buttons, broken toenails, fissured soles and barefoot. In appearance, too, there is an implicit contrast between the White Europeans, the visual impact of this being the symbolic figure of the visiting Princess Margaret, and the coal black complexion of the native Ali, and the in-between brown complexion of the Asian. Where employment is concerned, the Asians are not willing to pay much but expect the same cleanliness and efficiency from the African servants as the Europeans do: "We all wished ... that we could afford the well-trained servants who could run a household as smoothly as a well-oiled machine, without being visible."<sup>8</sup> But where do the African servants get their training? In the Asian households, of course, before they step into the sanitised world of the European.

When Ali comes to the Indian household, he is sullen, he mumbles, he does not do anything – his only positive feature is that he looks honest. The Indian household could well become a stepping stone to his employment with a European family: "If he was smart enough, he would pick up the requisite skills and sooner or later move on to employment in a richer home, finally even with a European family."<sup>9</sup> The ideal example of a discerning employer is that of the narrator's Grandmother who tells the servants she employs that her sons "require a clean house, like those of the Europeans"<sup>10</sup>. Ali, too, improves not only in his appearance but also in his work efficiency so that he becomes indispensable to the family, since he manages everything perfectly. The household is in a perpetual state of suspense because Ali shows no restlessness to move away and neither does he ask for a raise. Eventually, the narrator's Mother gives him a raise on her own to keep him

with her as he has become indispensable to the smooth functioning of the household.

Ali turns out to be a cheerful boy who works happily and becomes a friend to the young narrator, carrying him on his shoulders, telling him stories and often playing games with him and the other children. The confidence that this boy Ali gains as he lives in and works for the Indian household finally overshoots his social boundaries. Everyday Ali starts going up to make tea at the same time as Mehroon, the daughter of the house, would be taking her bath, so that he could peep in through the ventilation window. When he is discovered by the narrator to be spying on his sister as she takes her afternoon bath, Ali is not at all ruffled or frightened, neither of losing his job nor of being otherwise punished. He, in fact, confides to the narrator that he would one day marry Mehroon. Fanon describes the envious behavior of the native when he says that

The look that the native turns on the settler's town is a look of lust, a look of envy; it expresses his dreams of possession—all manner of possession: to sit at the settler's table, to sleep in the settler's bed, with his wife if possible. ... there is no native who does not dream at least once a day of setting himself up in the settler's place.<sup>11</sup>

The statement of Ali is not surprising as Mehroon becomes to him the embodiment of all that he envies and is desirous of possessing in the Indian family. On the other hand, the Indian family would entertain no other community except its own as a solicitor of Mehroon in marriage, and treats the African servant as much below their level. This reveals the precarious position of the Asians vis-à-vis the growing aggressiveness of the Africans, a precursor of what is to come when decolonization takes place. Inhabiting the in-between world, caught between the Europeans and the Africans, the Indians have no authority to protect their own against such threatening insinuations. The calm audacity that Ali exhibits shows a certain confidence in his control of the situation and is disturbing to the Asians considering that no African could normally presume to touch one of the Asian girls. It foreshadows later brutalities to come when Africa gains independence and the political ideology changes, bringing with it a change in racial equations. Nevertheless, the difference between the 'positionality' of the Asian vis-à-vis

the European as against the African vis-à-vis the Indian is established by a situation parallel to the spying of Ali on Mehroon, when the young narrator goes to gaze at the visiting Princess Margaret as she drives through their town,

I saw the princess waving a white-gloved hand. Her dress was white and her wide-brimmed hat was also white ... And beside her, in his tasseled black and gold ceremonials, the Governor, Sir Philip Morrisson – a name whose each syllable we had learnt to pronounce with mystical awe.<sup>12</sup>

The reiteration of the word “white” in describing the princess, distances her from the real life sphere of the narrator just as Mehroon is far removed from Ali’s sphere. They view her as an ‘angel’ descended from the sky, beyond their area of contact. The image of the Governor, however, is a powerful and threatening image that creates a protective shield around her, simply by his presence. In symbolic terms, he is an authoritative figure of supremacy, guarding the icon of emblematic power, Princess Margaret, repelling any aspirations of attaining her even before they are born in the hearts of the Indians and the Africans. As Fanon says,

‘The governing race is first and foremost those who come from elsewhere, those who are unlike the original inhabitants, “the others”’.<sup>13</sup>

The distancing device of creating an elitist aura around the Princess also conjures a dreamlike bubble around her, producing a gaze of impotent desire in the viewer that clearly establishes the social distance between them.

Thus, the story “Ali” makes a statement that predicts the course of future events. It clearly defines another of Frantz Fanon’s assumptions that

...it is evident that what parcels out the world is to begin with the fact of belonging to or not belonging to a given race, a given species. In the colonies the economic substructure is also a superstructure. The cause is the consequence; you are rich because you are white, you are white because you are rich.<sup>14</sup>

The statement also reveals the precariousness of the in-between world

of the Asians that can lose its social positionality due to any change in the tensions of power-structures as actually they have no standing locus in the arrangement of things. Eventually, this is exactly what happens with the declaration of independence in East Africa as the social positioning in the interdependence of the two races, the Asians and the Africans, reverses with the change in the political ideology of the country. True to the postmodern concept, social positionalities are not rigid, they are fluid situations where one-to-one equations can change at any time.

In the second story, "What Good Times We Had", the new locations of power are revealed. After the declaration of independence, the Africans have assumed total control over everything, ousting the Asians from their assumed position of power and control that they had exerted over the Africans under the rule of the Whites. The Indian community had benefited from the presence of the Whites and had established total control over the trading business; they had prospered and invested in property and they exercised economic power over the Africans by giving them employment. On the other hand, the Africans could not even enter the city of Dar unless they had an identity card displaying information about their employment in the city. Hence, disadvantaged in their own land and unable to take revenge on the Europeans who fled from Africa after handing over power, all their bitterness and hatred turns towards the Indians, as is depicted in the later stories in *Uhuru Street*.

In the story, "What Good Times We Had", things are turning from bad to worse for the Indian community as the newly decolonized African government is tightening its hold over the Indians. Most of the Indians have fled from East Africa to Western countries under some pretext or the other to escape the injustice and threat that looms over them. In this story the protagonist's complete family, except for her brother and herself, have already left the city. She has to take the bold decision of making good her escape, while the possibility of the chance is still there: "There was no choice, she told herself... She had waited too long and perhaps it was already too late."<sup>15</sup> The government has issued a ruling that air tickets for going out of the country could be bought only with the bank's permission, and that she knew is not an easy task since corruption is rampant and



everyone is out to make a quick buck.

The first obstacle to her going away is her sense of guilt in leaving her brother behind to fend for himself in a new disadvantaged situation. He is good enough as a businessman running a 'duka' but nothing more than that. She decides, however, to make good her escape but she has to depend on the goodwill of a bank-clerk who will get her a ticket in exchange for money. The story, thus, reveals the new focal points of power. The building too is a symbolic statement of a new political centre of power:

The building was new, erected a few years after Independence as headquarters of the national bank after the foreign banks were nationalized. Its modern expansive structure, grey and concrete, rose up a few storeys high to preside over an array of white-washed colonial buildings spread out around it.<sup>16</sup>

This show of power in the structure and location of the building is also evident in the total stranglehold that the African government is exerting over the Indian community, an example of which is the restraint on the free sale of air-tickets for foreign travel.

The young Asian woman's confrontation with the African bank clerk shows the binaries of the changed equations of power. The clerk is complacent and in control of the situation whereas the young woman tries to show her aggression and annoyance. Nevertheless, she knows that she has to keep her calm until the time that she gets hold of the ticket. She pretends to be in control of the situation, but is very well aware that no one believes it. She agrees to the amount of money that the bank clerk asks for, though she knows he is asking for too much; she further agrees to drive him to the place he will pick up the ticket from, though she is annoyed and protests that she is not at his beck and call. In effect, she knows that there is no alternative in these precarious times and she is at his mercy,

There was a price for everything here. And after all that, there was no peace to be had even at night time for fear of robbers. They lived on the edge, not knowing if they would be pushed off the precipice the next day – or if the hand of providence would lift them up and transport them to safety.<sup>17</sup>

This picture of the present times is in sharp contrast to her memory of the past as she had lived it and remembered it. She remembered a different by-gone world, and experience of happiness in the very area to which she drives the bank clerk,

What times they had had there, she thought with bitterness. On this very road they used to go on picnics in open trucks, ... singing, playing, laughing, ... Food was abundant, fruit almost free, servants plentiful ... violence, real violence, unknown ... Gone, wiped clean. A dream had passed.<sup>18</sup>

In the changed socio-political scene, the bank clerk sits in a proprietary manner in her car, relaxed and at ease, his body language projecting his control over the situation, "He sat comfortably beside her, the thought of which irked her. Like a husband, or a boss, arm resting on window, stomach pushing out."<sup>19</sup> As she approaches the picnic spot on the beach, of which she had been thinking, she sees the huts are burnt down – a clear indication of the undermining of their authority. By the time she realizes the real purpose of the bank clerk, it is too late to retract her steps. He takes the money from her and makes her drive him to the isolated picnic spot where he rapes her and then murders her brutally. The 'in-between' world in which they had lived, deluded into a sense of superiority and security, has now left them at a totally vulnerable position vis-à-vis the Africans.

Thus, the calculated hostility of the Africans jeopardizes the world of the South Asians, and places them in a precarious position. The main objective of the Indian community in East Africa was that of peaceful survival. Their positionality between the Europeans and the Africans is also indicative of the 'mean' path, not veering to either extreme, not getting involved in politics, but quietly, through their hard work, to establish themselves in their adopted land. They cling to their native community and carry the cultural baggage that they have brought with them, and do not try to assimilate into the cultural space of the adopted land. They are a peaceful law abiding community that avoids attracting attention to themselves, but they cannot help becoming 'visible' because of their economic prosperity. So long as the British are there, they flourish under their patronage but the end of colonialism changes all positionalities. At a stroke, they became the

disadvantaged and marginalized periphery, and the tensions of power equations between the Africans and the Asians change as in the name of 'socialism' the Africans confiscate the dignity and the wealth of the Asians. In the effort of the Africans to establish themselves as the masters, the Asians become the sacrificial scapegoat and bears the brunt of the natives' anger and violence for having rejected them earlier. To conclude in the words of Fanon,

We have said that the colonial context is characterized by the dichotomy which it imposes upon the whole world. Decolonization unifies that people by the radical decision to remove from it its heterogeneity, and by unifying it on a national, sometimes a racial basis. ...that is to say that the native can see clearly and immediately if decolonization has come to pass or not, for his minimum demands are simply that the last shall be the first.<sup>20</sup>

### References

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