

M. G. Vassanji: An Interview

Shane Rhodes

Volume 22, Number 2, Summer 1997

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/scl22_2int01

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

ISSN

0380-6995 (print)

1718-7850 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Rhodes, S. (1997). M. G. Vassanji: An Interview. *Studies in Canadian Literature*, 22(2), 105–117.

Article abstract

Moyez Vassanji speaks to Shane Rhodes of his personal history of movings, the radical diversity in his life that has resulting from them, and how they affect his writing. Vassanji also notes his visits to India and that fact that the country demands a response from him as a writer. In discussing *The Gunny Sack* and his novels *No New Land* and *The Book of Secrets*, Vassanji also touches on the importance in his work of storyteller characters, deals with history and issues of colonialism, and comments the ways in which religious objects become mysterious, as well as the relationship between sex and mystery in his writing.

M. G. VASSANJI : AN INTERVIEW

SCL/ÉLC Interview by Shane Rhodes

M. G. Vassanji was born in Nairobi, Kenya, and raised in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. He moved to the United States to study at M.I.T. in Massachusetts, where he received a doctorate in nuclear physics in 1978. He then moved to Canada and currently lives in Toronto. His first novel, The Gunny Sack, was the African Regional winner of the Commonwealth Writers' Prize in the first book category in 1989. Since then he has published three additional works of fiction: No New Land (1991), a collection of short stories, Uhuru Street (1992), and The Book of Secrets which won the Giller Prize as the Best Work of Canadian Fiction in 1994.

Shane Rhodes interviewed Moyez Vassanji in Fredericton, New Brunswick, in March, 1997.

SR Could you talk a bit about the movings you have experienced in your life? What was it like for you going from Tanzania to the United States when you were nineteen?

MGV It's hard to say. When I was growing up, we tended to move quite a bit. My grandparents on my mother's side moved from India to Zanzibar, then from Zanzibar to Mombasa, then from Mombasa to Dar es Salaam. My mother had moved from Mombasa to Nairobi. I think for the Indians in Africa a sense of movement has always been there.

It's hard to encapsulate what it's like to move to another place not knowing what exactly to expect there. There was always mystery and a fear that when you went away you would not return the same person. Moving to the United States was not part of the same movement from place to place for me, but it was rather a total movement.

SR And your move from the United States to Canada? You describe this elsewhere as a hard time in your life — could you describe this move?

MGV The move itself was not difficult; I was basically pursuing a career, a job. I didn't know where it would lead and I could have gone anywhere. I was just one step after receiving my doctorate. Toronto was the place that fit into my interests at the time.

SR How has this radical diversity in your own life affected your writing?

MGV I don't know how it has affected my writing because it is a part of my writing. That's what my writing is. On the other hand, I find it very hard to think of people who have not moved, or who come from very simple backgrounds. We live in such times — I have moved and I have seen the world transform — that to live a stationary life seems impossible. But even if you have never left Toronto, Toronto itself has left you. It is always a different place from what it was and what you remember year from year. A place changes over time. In that sense, we have all lived through tumultuous transformations. Some of us through greater changes than others.

SR What about your recent trips to India? How did the stories you had heard about India, the history that you knew, affect your travels there?

MGV I didn't have a framework of India in mind when I went there. My India was an India of cultural resonances. The geographical aspect of India was never in my mind because I had never been there. When I moved to the United States, I went through a time when it was very important for me to recapture the Indian culture I had grown up with. But again this was only a cultural connection and not a physical connection to a real place. Of course, I had thought of going to India but at the time it was not a very urgent desire. I was brought up in the belief that my family had left India behind.

When I went to India for the first time, I was really struck by how immediate it was. It seemed as if I had found something that was a part of me, and I couldn't get over that feeling for quite a while. To suddenly find that there was a part of you that you had

closed off was quite surprising. India was a whole new world that had come alive, a world that had been closed off, that now opened to complicate my life even further. I was very fortunate in being able to travel to India and experience this, and I made many great friends. There were of course still differences but even in India, just as in North America, there are differences. Differences are there but when you feel this affinity, this very strong identification, it startles you.

I also realize that not everybody that goes back to India feels this way. I have had friends who went there and visited the sights, were wowed by them, and came back after a two week tour in four-star hotels. I have never stayed in a fancy hotel in India; I have always stayed in hostels, guest houses, and people's houses. My experience of India has been at a middle-class level. Again, I think I have been fortunate in being able to do this.

SR Did it shock you in any way?

MGV It shocked me profoundly. My first trip was shortly after the bombing of the Ayodhya mosque and during my visit there were riots in Bombay and Gujarat. In fact, I had to cancel my trip to Bombay because of the riots. The kind of violence that erupts during such communal riots, the brutality unleashed against children and women, against poor people, is just mind-boggling. Even Bosnia doesn't compare to it. What amazed me, though, was the sanguinity of the middle class. I suppose it comes from having seen such violence so many times. I was told many times that "It happens there. It doesn't happen here." And "there" could be three miles away! It was something I could not get over. Such barbarity takes place around you, yet you still go on with life if it doesn't affect you directly. It must be a means of survival and part of the belief that India will just go on living through one phase and another and another. I was told this and I suppose it is so. But this was an aspect of India I had never experienced and I could not, and still have not, come to terms with.

India demands a response. As a writer, India demands a response from you. And in my case it's also a matter of trying to find myself historically.

My last trip was in March of 1995. I started a book about my experience of India about five years ago but I still think I will

have to go back a couple of times before I feel comfortable with completing the book. I have to find my own angle into the Indian experience. The last time I was there I thought I had finally found it, but I have to see. One could, of course, spend a lifetime traveling to India.

SR In *The Gunny Sack* and your newest book, *The Book of Secrets*, the character of the storyteller — of Salim and of Pius Fernandes — seems highlighted so that the reader cannot forget that the story is a construction emanating from a particular personal perspective. But I'm wondering about the importance of this technique to you. Is it to stress the difference between the present and the past, and the importance that the individual storyteller has in bringing the two together?

MGV I think in both novels there is a conscious statement that each book is just one construction of history. In *The Gunny Sack*, the narrator states that if he put it all back into the gunny sack and started the whole process over he would come back up with something totally different. In *The Book of Secrets*, this is *my* book of secrets with the emphasis very much on *mine*. It is not only history filtered through one person but history as seen at a certain time. If a person were to construct a history at two different times in his life, he would end up with two totally different books. You see, history is very much an accident of time and person. In *The Book of Secrets*, you have the diary, the book of secrets, but you also have the novel that the author has produced. In the same way, you have the gunny sack which is real but you also have the gunny sack which is in the narrator's mind. History is a play between all of these different objects: the created and the creating, the real and the imagined. In another sense, the narrator and the historian both play a kind of game with history; the idea of the book as a game, a play between things, is very important for me. The act of writing becomes a gamesmanship.

SR How similar did you see your own position in respect to Pius's?

MGV Not very similar at all. Fernandes comes from the generation of my school teachers. In fact, the *Book of Secrets* is a tribute to my teachers, many of whom were Goans; the narrative

is in empathy with that generation. Of course, this was a very different generation from mine and strained by differences of time and place. Fernandes says at some point that he wishes he could be one of his own students and go into that world where everything seems to begin, where everything is possible. He obviously can't but he has produced many students who will and have. I suppose an empathy was also there with Pius's compassion and his humanity. But I have created characters who were much closer to me, who came from my generation and background. I had as much empathy with Fernandes as with Gregory or Corbin. Gregory had left his land, moved to Dar es Salaam and gone local; Corbin also moved from his homeland. Both had moved away just as I had moved to a place I had heard of and seen in movies but a place still totally alien. My empathy is with those who are travellers on some mission yet who somehow lose their way.

SR The all-important book in *The Book of Secrets* is, to start with, Alfred Corbin's diary. This diary operates on some very peculiar ground in that it seems simultaneously a book that "steals [a community's] souls and locks them away" yet at the same time Fernandes's intrusion into the diary's private world seems almost criminal and self-satisfying. Perhaps, if you are going to tell a story, you have to intrude, you have to, in a way, steal your way into a history that is not always yours.

MGV But Corbin's diary is over 70 years old and so there's that temporal distance between the object and the historian. And many of the diaries from this time period already exist in literature as memoirs. Because of this, Fernandes could feel a little free in his writing and, in the process, he ends up opening up more of himself than he does of Corbin. But the authorial act of writing does involve stealing from other people's lives and, I think more importantly, from the author's own life. The writer wounds and exposes himself in sometimes very frightening ways. You cannot really control yourself when you are writing and there is an element not of masochism but of pain endured because it must be endured. I think I understand, for example, why Salman Rushdie went into such exigencies in his *Satanic Verses*. What I can glean from his experience is that in exploring areas of his own spirituality he had to think himself into territories that

were necessarily frightening. In the same way, I think an author exposes the people around him to being opened up onto the pages of a book. All experience becomes character and narrative; everything gets put on the page. Fernandes has the luxury of looking at a dead document, whereas I'm looking at much more. But of course Fernandes ends up looking at much more too.

SR In a way, Fernandes's historical reconstruction becomes almost allegorical of colonization itself since a history, to be recuperated, must be at least partially colonized, if I can use the word in such a figurative way, by the present.

MGV I hadn't thought of it that way. Yes, the writing of history is always an intrusion into the past, especially if you are writing about the personal lives of historical figures. But the person who is intruding is never very far from the lives of the characters he recreates. So with that understanding in mind, I think to figure the writing of history as colonial is a bit extreme. There is an understanding between the writer and his material that there is not in colonizing. But an author or a historian can easily say this, yet the people who read the book, especially those who are the subjects of it, often don't see it this way.

SR *The Book of Secrets* is fascinated with the English — whether it be Corbin, Maynard or Gregory. I'm just wondering why these English men seem to hold so much interest for the novel? Are they valued relics of a colonial past that cannot be forgotten?

MGV In one sense, I cannot escape the fact that these Englishmen were there in Tanzania when I was growing up. Any consideration of the colonial experience would have to include them; if you are going to write about this time period, in this place, it would be impossible not to include them in your narrative. Of course, you can caricature them — which I think is legitimate — or you can create them as full-blooded characters. I have done it this latter way because these characters are examples of men I have met. And they fascinated me because I wondered what exactly they were like, these people who were headmasters in my school or taught English, or who walked about in their shorts and stockings, these administrators, these little godlings. As you move away

from that environment and feel less insecure and belong more and more to the world from which they came, then you think that maybe you understand them a bit more. You understand that maybe you would not have been much different from them if you had been sent to Africa in the way they had been. At least a part of you can empathize — not with everything, but with parts of their experience. Of course, this was a challenge. So in a sense it was not really anglophilia but just dealing with those who were there.

My fascination now is with "Americanness." Of course, what with the presence everywhere of American movies and television, they are not as mysterious as the English were; such an enigma doesn't exist with Americans. But again you have an interface between a large empire and, if you look at it historically, a helpless people. Anyone who has carried a Third-World passport and tried to get into London in the '60s or the United States in the '70s and '80s knows what it means to belong and not to belong, what it means to be part of a ruling class and not part of a ruling class. The workings of these large ruling empires and how they affect other groups and how over time things develop and change has always fascinated me. You have Third-World people now brought up in the United States and working for Senate Subcommittees. Everything, given time, gets turned on its head. I think the incentive to create a Corbin or a Gregory or a Maynard must have come from this interest.

SR Gregory seems such an interesting character.

MGV I have been told, and I'm pretty sure it's true, that every large colonial city had at least one person like Gregory — the one who went local. In some ways, I think even some of Joseph Conrad's characters would approximate Gregory. Gregory was inspired by a teacher we had in our school who never taught me but anybody who was at least five years older than me would be able to identify Gregory as him. Gregory exemplifies defiance and I think this is largely what attracted the boys to him. He's this guy who doesn't care how he dresses or how he talks; there's a pipe in his mouth and saliva dribbling down his chin. But he's brilliant and respected and doesn't give a damn what the other English people think of him. He was like a hero to the boys. You can't let characters like that go.

SR In the relationship between Ali and Rita what is the importance of Rita Hayworth and Prince Aly Khan?

MGV Some of this stuff I cannot tell you and you'll have to find out for yourself because I fictionalized bits of it! In the '50s, there were always these people who everybody would say in a whisper, you know, "He looks like Prince Aly Khan." Or there were girls who were called Rita — one of them lives in Calgary now — because they were beautiful. The romance of Rita and Prince Aly Khan was very much part of culture in the '50s; it was in the Western papers. When the divorce happened it made major international news. I think I try to explore with a bit of humour how these people become enmeshed within local legend and beliefs. And when you look at Rita Hayworth's life it was really not that extraordinary. She came from an immigrant family and had to change her name to become accepted as an American actress. I found this all quite interesting. Prince Aly Khan is more of a difficult subject because he was a religious figure also. I used them both in a tongue-and-cheek way to show how Hollywood glamour is reflected and mimicked in a small town.

SR Sex in *The Book of Secrets* seems to be one of the recurring mysteries. There is the relationship between Corbin and Mariamu where no one is really sure who fathered Ali; there is the unsolved rape of Mariamu; there are the relationships between Gregory and Pius, between Rita and Pius, and between Gregory and Anne Corbin. Why is sex as mystery so important to this novel?

MGV Beats me! I think one of the reasons is historical distance; you cannot get into these characters' heads fifty years after the fact. But you are still left with tantalizing suggestions of what could have been. Of course you could just go and write it out, you know: "In a dark room, they went and had sex." But I think just leaving sex as the mystery which it is is much more involving and much more important. I find it pleasing that I cannot know these details because I would like to imagine what could have happened. And not only that but there is mystery, just as in historical life, in everyday life. People have parts of themselves that they know nothing about and do not want to face. You deal with life as it comes at you. You could say I'm either homosexual, bi-

sexual or heterosexual but in the novel Fernandes just goes on. He has feelings for Gregory but also has feelings for Rita. Sexuality doesn't seem to be an important concern for him; Fernandes dealt with every situation as best he could and tries to understand from that. People don't have to be pinned down to a single controlling identity like they seem to be nowadays.

SR What about Frank Maynard? I'm not sure what to make of him. He's a brutal man yet at the same time seems to have a certain respect for his native "enemies" that people like the missionaries don't have.

MGV For him, Africa is the enemy and he's a soldier; it's a direct relationship of one to one. "We'll fight and whoever wins, wins!" Whereas the missionaries come with their own self-righteousness and simplifications that don't always work. Maynard is based on a real soldier whose diary I read. In fact, Maynard's incident with the baboons is very similar to an incident described by this soldier. But I also made much up. The real guy went on to work with Lawrence of Arabia, while Maynard stayed and went local on some level. Maynard is very much like an adult boy-scout who believes in some — but not all — of the values he represents. He just enjoys being a warrior. Corbin represents the administrative class who at least had some sympathy with the Africans, as opposed to the settler class. If you look at Karen Blixen's books or Elspeth Huxley's books, Indians are hardly present. You see all these films and all the boring books and you wonder: these people who went into Indian shops to buy groceries never saw the Indians around them.

On the other hand, the African attracted the white because he was the Other, the antithesis, whereas the Indian really bothered the whites quite a bit; he was in the way.

SR In *The Gunny Sack*, Salim is given three books from Ji Bai; in *The Book of Secrets*, we are presented with book after book — from Corbin's diary to Maynard's notebook to Fernandes's own manuscripts. Why is the book such an important image for you in these two novels?

MGV The idea of a closed book fascinates me. In our Indian tradition, we were told of scripts — and this is suggested in *The*

Gunny Sack — that were used by small communities. These scripts were local versions based on the dominant Devanagary script and they were used by traders to keep trade secrets or by communities to keep their secrets from other communities that might be hostile. I think my interest in books might come from these stories of secret scripts which were not supposed to be read outside of a certain group. When I was researching *The Book of Secrets*, I came across an old book with a small button that you opened and shut. I was fascinated by it: a book that could be locked. Then there are all these stories about secret formulas, mantras, which you were given by your guru or your imam and were not supposed to say it out loud. If you said it out loud, you would go mad. These must have all contributed.

SR If you look at Pipa in *The Book of Secrets* and how he treats Corbin's diary as a spiritual object, or, in comparison, that scene where Pipa steals Livingstone's diary and it is handled and passed around, the book becomes an object of mystery precisely because it cannot be understood.

MGV There is a parody here of how religious books acquire their mystery. Many people have not read their holy book and yet for them the book is still holy. I had a smile when I was writing that because these people, especially Pipa, are worshipping something that they cannot read. The Islamic book itself was a revelation to a prophet who could not read, yet the angel told him to read. There might be a parallel there but I'm not sure; I didn't consciously work it out.

SR Your second novel, *No New Land*, seems markedly different from all your other fiction. The writing is simpler and the history, compared to *The Gunny Sack* or to *The Book of Secrets*, somewhat thinner. Was this different writing inevitable given the novel's setting in Canada where the African-Asian experience must be so markedly different to the African-Asian history in Africa?

MGV I set out after *The Gunny Sack* to write a very straightforward book based on this event — which I put in a short story first — of a man accused of intending to commit rape. I had no intention of making it as complex as my other novels, yet there is still some ambiguity operating in *No New Land*. The ambiguity of

intentions, for example. For Nurdin Lalani, who was brought up under a very strict religious code, even to think of touching a girl lustfully was already a sin. He himself was not sure whether or not he sinned. She accuses him of touching her with the intent to rape and *he did touch her* not exactly with the intent to rape but still *with the thought of it in his head*. So there was that element of ambiguity operating in the novel. But it was not artifice because I could not imagine a man like this touching a girl without sexual thoughts in mind — even if they were not intended. In life there are always such ambiguities, where, if you look deep enough, you are made to wonder — on some level — if you are really all that innocent. Initially, I expected that a novel set in Canada would produce a much thinner book, and if you wrote a novel that was entirely Canadian content then, yes, it would be thin. But the people who come here are not just Canadian content; they bring with them their own intricate pasts. It would be hard for me to set a major novel in Canada; I'm sure it could be done but it would involve a lot of work or it would be a more internal or psychological novel.

The novel I am writing right now is set in the United States where a big novel is possible because, of course, the world is American. Everywhere you look, there is America. And I think of this new novel as very much a Canadian novel because of its obsession with America. America is a very Canadian preoccupation. So I have an answer prepared for all those people who will ask when the book comes out, "You are a Canadian! Why are you writing about America?" I will tell them that their question already contains their answer.

SR But it does make sense that a novel about an Asian experience in Canada would be markedly different than one set in East Africa, where the history is so much deeper.

MGV But the Asian experience in Canada cannot be divorced from its experience in Asia and Africa. As soon as you try to do that, as I did in *No New Land* so I could deal with a very specific area in Toronto, you have a novel without the historical weight of my other novels. But I still quite enjoyed writing the book.

SR The pure is not valorized; in fact the one girl in *The Gunny Sack* who marries out of her family to an African is seen I

think as almost heroic, one of those able to escape a certain logic of purity. Your writing seems to be moving towards something akin to Rushdie's valorization of syncretism, of the impure. Do you see your novels as an attempt to valorize this idea of impurity, of embracing diversity?

MGV Yes, because I was brought up under a very syncretistic tradition, a tradition which I see currently under threat. But, as opposed to Rushdie, I think I was brought up in an even more syncretistic culture. Our names for the imam would be the Hindu names for the Krishna; we would still speak of the Krishna in worshipful terms — a fact which really bothered a lot of mainstream Muslims. Our people were converted between two and five hundred years ago from sects which worshipped the god Vishnu, yet Vishnu was still an important part of the religious atmosphere I was brought up in.

Anything that stinks of purity is just abominable. I personally cannot tolerate these calls to purify. The pressure to purify is very much what happens when a small group of people who came from a small part of India suddenly emerge into the world. The world has its own idea of what constitutes Islam, Hinduism or Christianity, and then tries to impose these ideas on all others. So, paradoxically, the more modern you become the more fundamentalist. This is very ironic and a very strange phenomena. The modern world demands a narrowness where there used to be a greater degree of tolerance.

SR What about the Shamsi? Ostensibly, this is a fictional community based on the Muslim Ismailis . . .

MGV They are inspired by the Ismailis but they are not identical with them. I guess they would be called the Khoja Ismailis. You would find Ismailis in other parts of the world who were totally different.

SR What were the reasons for this fictionalization?

MGV My reasons for creating the Shamsi at the time, though I still think it was a wise choice, was to allow for a certain fictional freedom. If I were to write about a real religious group, then my dates would have to be exactly right. I don't care for that degree of detail; it is not part of my fiction. The Shamsi could have been

any other group from India but I just happened to pick this one. There are other groups with similar backgrounds. But to stick to reality, to the facts, just makes fiction boring and restrictive.

SR Why does the writing of African-Indian history have such urgency for you?

MGV I don't see the novels as capturing African-Indian history. I just wrote the novels to investigate certain aspects of the life that I knew. The intent was not to write a history but to use history and to see what happens to a certain group of people over a certain period of time. Each of the novels forefronts a narrator so as to indicate that this "history" you are reading has been focused through a certain individual prism; in this way, for me, the process of trying to understand the past, of featuring characters who are in the process of reconstructing it, is an important part of my fiction.