Examining the themes of exile, identity, longing, displacement, race relations, rootlessness, and ultimately, acceptance is the staple stuff of most novels on the diasporic experience. Sudesh Mishra defines diasporic writing as belonging to two categories – the ‘sugar’ and the ‘masala’ diaspora – the non-voluntary ‘girmitiyas’ who were taken as indentured labourers to work in colonial plantations, versus the more voluntary diasporics who left their home country in search of better opportunities elsewhere. But interestingly, writers of both these categories share the angst of living a hyphenated existence, pondering continuously on the question, where is ‘home’? On the one hand, ‘home’ is a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination and in this sense it is a place of no return. On the other hand, home is also the lived experience of a locality. An Indian by descent, the Kenyan-born, Tanzania-raised, US educated, and a Canadian by citizenship since 1978, M.G. Vassanji is a writer who falls somewhere in between the two categories. Like Neil Bissoondath and Michael Ondaatje, he is an Indian expatriate separated from the subcontinent by generations.

For a nuclear physicist with a doctoral degree from the University of Pennsylvania and who worked at the Chalk River atomic power station, Vassanji’s career change came according to his own declaration after studying Sanskrit and Indian philosophy. In an interview with Chelva Kanaganayakam, Vassanji said this of his decision to leave the field of physics:

It is the kind of thing you can keep on doing. I had reached a point when I could just churn out things. Unless you are at MIT or Harvard, or a place like that, you are not really at the forefront. Sometimes I miss that life because of the way of thinking it demands. My writing, however, is much more important. It seems to be the mission in life that I finally achieved (34).
So what did he write about? Right from the beginning of his writing career, Vassanji’s work dwells upon the themes of migration of Indians living in East Africa. Some members of this community later undergo a second migration to Europe, Canada, or the United States. As he tells Ray Deonandan, “We come from a dense social background. As youths we are surrounded by people: large families, small communities. There are so many characters we observe that we can’t fit them in our heads, so they overflow into stories.” In his first Commonwealth Writer’s Prize-winning novel, *The Gunny Sack* (1989), Vassanji tells the story of four generations of Asians in Tanzania and how to preserve and recreate oral histories and mythologies that have long been silenced. “I put a lot of my emotional baggage in it,” he admits to an interviewer, Gene Carey. The novel celebrates the spirit of Asian pioneers, Muslims from India who moved to East Africa in the early 1900s. Living under German colonial rule, the family of Dhanji Govindji becomes permanent residents of Africa while witnessing historical events that result in the birth of African nationalism. Creating a family memoir, a coming-of-age story that looks at the past with affection and understanding, Vassanji shows that the hopes and dreams of Indian immigrants were essentially the same as those of Europeans who went to the New World: namely, education for their children and a more prosperous future for the next generation.

“We come from a dense social background,” Vassanji says of the Third World expatriate experience to Ray Deonandan. “As youths we are surrounded by people: large families, small communities. There are so many characters we observe that we can’t fit them in our heads, so they overflow into stories.” *Uhuru* Street, published in 1992, is a collection of loosely linked stories that all take place along the same street in Dar es Salaam and interestingly where many characters from the first novel reappear. “Every writer identifies with a certain experience; it’s a very private experience, but becomes universal when compared with other experiences,” adds the writer. *Uhuru* Street, formerly known as Kichwele Street, “began in the [African] hinterland…came downtown lined by Indian shops, and ended at the ocean. The city’s own long history is evoked in references to the Arab, Indian and European people who came to it: “traveller and merchant, slave trader, missionary and colonizer.” It is thus a history of a specific type of African city – one which attracted entrepreneurs, adventurers and exploiters from elsewhere, a situation bound to
change when independence came to the region. But although Dar es Salaam changes, its expatriate citizens link it to a larger world and they themselves remain bound to it in their memories, even if they do not return. The Indian shops and tenements of the city – mostly very modest establishments – form the setting of most of the tales, as these Muslim Indian families (often third-generation settlers) eke out a modest and somewhat precarious living from commerce. Many of the fascinating series of portraits (which is what most of these stories are) are of an urban underclass one could find in most cities across the world, but these descriptions all have a distinct local flavour and they are all filtered through a memory that is at once nostalgic and sharp-eyed. Also many of the stories acknowledge the inevitable racial tensions and hierarchies of this multiethnic society, within which the Indian families form a specific communal cluster.

In *The Book of Secrets* (1994) that won him the first Giller Prize that same year, Vassanji traces the histories of people who possessed the diary of a British administrator, the book of secrets. In 1988, a retired Indian-born schoolteacher named Pius Fernandes receives an old diary found in the backroom of an East African shop. Written in 1913 by a British colonial administrator, the diary captivates Fernandes, who begins to research the coded history he encounters in its terse, laconic entries. What he uncovers is a story of forbidden liaisons and simmering vengeances, family secrets and cultural exiles – a story that leads him on an investigative journey through his own past and Africa’s. When researching on this book, Vassanji discovered how poorly the British had treated his grandparents and the other Indians of East Africa. “But Indians are fence-sitters,” he declares without judgment. “From this imperialist history, we’ve become the middle-men everywhere we go. Sometimes this is a reason for scorn, but provides a good vantage for observation.” (Deonandan). The colonial history of Kenya and Tanzania serves as the backdrop of the book but it is the personal history contained in the diary of a colonial administrator that fuels the story. While the narrator, a retired schoolteacher, reads the diary and attempts to trace the events that occur after the diary stops, he eventually finds himself revisiting his own personal history. Even though none of the characters ever return to India, the country’s presence looms throughout the novel. Talking of his career and of his roots Vassanji tells Gene Carey:
Once you come here, cross the oceans, there’s no going back. There’s a psychological belonging to East Africa, particularly Tanzania. You need something to hold on……I went back to Tanzania in 1989 after 19 years. It is part of my soul. The other part is India, which I visited for the first time in 1993. My father had never been to India, the land of my forefathers. After that, I have visited India a couple of more times.

*The Book of Secrets* makes frequent reference to the world’s separated pockets of Indian culture – New York, East Africa, Toronto and Dubai. Though not a conscious thing, the theme of displacement is pervasive. In another interview given to Shane Rhodes, Vassanji speaks of his personal history of movings, the radical diversity in his life that has resulted from them, and how they affect his writing. He also notes his visits to India and that fact that the country demands a response from him as a writer. For example, in the novel, Vassanji focuses on the interaction between the Shamsi (Indian) community and the native Africans, as well as the colonial administration.

*No New Land* (1991) is set in Toronto, and portrays a group of Indians from Tanzania trying to adapt to life in a new land. Nurudin Lalani and his family go to the Toronto suburb of Don Mills only to find that the old world and its values pursue them. A genial orderly at a downtown hospital, he has been accused of sexually assaulting a girl. Although he is innocent, tradition propriety prompts him to question the purity of his own thoughts. Ultimately, his friendship with the enlightened Sushila offers him an alluring freedom from a past that haunts him, a marriage that has become routine, and from the trials of coping with teenage children. Introducing us to a cast of vividly drawn characters within this immigrant community, Vassanji is a keen observer of lives caught between one world and another. Humorous and tragic all at once, the novel illustrates how the past always haunts the present and the future. The theme is re-examined again in *Amriika* (1999), which may be viewed as a classic immigrant story that focuses upon the story of Ramji, a young student who comes in America from Dar es Salaam, (the African city that was Vassanji’s home till 1970) and his subsequent life in North America. The variation of the spelling of America in the title of course refers to the way many Indians pronounce the name. Though world of the 1960s in America forms the backdrop – a world of the anti-Vietnam movement, “changing values and sexual freedom, of peace marches, religious cults, and protest
bombings” and is a country that is far different from the one he dreamed about, Vassanji has also inevitably woven his tale around the issues of exile, longing, displacement, and ultimately, acceptance. Swept up in events whose consequences will haunt him for years to come, Ramji ultimately finds himself drawn into a set of circumstances that hold terrifying reminders of the past and its unanswered questions. By relating the plight of the protagonist to that of his own, Vassanji tells Gene Cary:

Once you come here, cross the oceans, there’s no going back. There’s a psychological belonging to East Africa, particularly Tanzania. You need something to hold on….In the case of Ramji, it is an extreme situation. He breaks away. He goes to an ashram to isolate himself. To me, it is a personal statement. Ramji learns about radicalism in America. He has guilt feelings about not returning back to channel his knowledge into politics but the idea remains at the back of his mind. If learning about radicalism is the first irony in the book, the second one is realization that in America he is still considered a colored person, a Third-world person.

In November 2003, Vassanji won a second Giller Prize for his novel The In-Between World of Vikram Lall which is the culminating story of his experiences as a diasporic writer inhabiting many spaces but belonging to none. Set in East Africa it deals with the ambiguous situation of South Asians in East Africa who are neither indigenous Africans nor European colonizers. Many of them cannot find a familiar refuge on the Indian subcontinent nor in the colonial ‘home country.’ They are alienated from their African homelands regardless of their emotional attachments and legal status. Possessing a “double vision” which comes only when one is alienated from the dominant group, the protagonist of this novel tells us about his own evolution in a world of bribery and corruption that spans forty-seven years of history in Kenya. In their citation for awarding the Giller Prize for Vassanji’s latest book of fiction, the jurists called The In-Between World of Vikram Lall “an astonishing tapestry of irresistible vignettes, brilliantly exploring the painful lessons of history – national, cultural and personal – amidst the fragility of human relationships.” In spite of claiming it to be a work of fiction, like his earlier works, this novel is a thinly veiled autobiographical work. Like the indentured labourers who went to Mauritius, the Caribbean islands, Fiji, and other places to work in colonial sugar plantations, this story tells us about three generations of Hindu Punjabi migrants who went to East Africa to work as labourers to lay tracks for the British colonial East African Railways. It also gives a vivid picture of the
Shamsis, the Kutchis and the Gujarati businessmen who flourished in this region but were eventually uprooted and displaced at the end of the colonial rule, and especially after the Mau Mau uprisings and the presidency of the ‘Old Man,” Jomo Kenyatta.

Growing up in Nakuru, Kenya, in the 1950s, nine-year old Vikram Lall and his sister Deepa, the children of Indian merchants, become friends with two British children, and with Njoroge, a Kikuyu, who lives with his grandfather, the gardener of the Lalls and other local families. While Vic is secretly in love with the British girl Annie, Njoroge is secretly in love with Deepa, both childhood relationships ignoring the cultural and colour barrier of that era. It was a time when avoiding the pull of the ‘homeland,’ most Indian paid their allegiance to the British crown and longed to settle in England. This is also the time when the Mau Mau, a Kikuyu group dedicated to rid their own country of the British rulers, started up underground terrorism and violence. Alternating points of view between the present, when Vikram Lall is in his fifties and lives outside Toronto with the distinction of being numbered “one of Africa’s most corrupt men, a cheat of monstrous and reptilian cunning,” and the early 1950s, in which as a child he lived in a diverse Kenyan community, Vassanji gradually establishes the conditions which make life in Kenya for a non-African a difficult and sometimes difficult activity. It shows us how, in spite of their wealth, the Asians were always considered Shylocks, never to be trusted. Yet the protagonist is aware that they “all carry the past” inside them in some way and “can’t help it.” Vividly describing Vic’s ties with the Indian community, both in Kenya and with the family “back home,” he shows how the Lalls are doubly alienated, first from their family in India, whose village near Peshawar, thanks to the British Partition of India, is now part of Pakistan, and from the majority population in Kenya. “My fantasy has partly to do with desperate need to belong to the land I was born in – but it’s not possible either,” (61) adds the main character. When violence strikes closer home, Vic moves with his family to Nairobi and the disintegration of his family and personal life begins. Getting a job in the Ministry of Transport, Vic soon moves up the political ladder, working for ministries and powerful individuals, but is made the proverbial scapegoat when money-laundering charges are thrust upon him. Slowly Vic is depicted as a man who has reached a point of no return when political whims decide his
personal agenda. He is an Indian without a constituency, whom the rulers could hold up and
display to the World Bank and other donors as the “crafty alien corruptor” of their country.

Like V.S.Naipaul in most of his writings, there are bits and pieces of Vassanji’s own
story in this novel. Like his fictional hero Vikram Lall, Vassanji is the proverbial outsider.
Left dangling without seeing any way out of his predicament, Vikram’s as well as his
creator’s condition remind us of Trishanku, the character from The Ramayana who went
‘embodied’ to heaven but had to settle at an intermediate third space, midway between the
earth and paradise. This condition, earlier described by fellow Indian-Canadian writer Uma
Parameswaran, serves as a metaphor for the modern expatriate/immigrant. In his obsession
with going to heaven in his own body, Trishanku represents the consequences of narcissism;
his story includes an encounter between the divine and the human, but above all highlights
the body and the spirit. Even in Canada, the chosen hiding place for a self-exile, Vikram Lall
still craves for his African and Indian roots, though he knows quite well that he will belong
to none and has to be satisfied with his “in-betweenness.” In the epilogue to the novel,
Vassanji quotes from three different sources, all emphasizing this rootless condition. The
first is from T.S. Eliot’s The Waste Land, “Who is the third who walks always beside you?”.
The second is from Brihadaranyaka Upanishad: “Neti, neti.” (Not this, not that). The third
is a Swahili riddle “Po pote niendapo anifuata” (Wherever I go he follows me) the answer to
which is a shadow. It would not therefore be too far-fetched to state that the ‘Hell – Midway
– Heaven’ diasporic formula can be equated with Vassanji’s and his protagonist Vikram
Lall’s relationship with Africa – Canada – India, in that order.

This random survey of the six books that he has written till date shows that Vassanji
is primarily concerned with how migrations and multiple-migrations affect the lives and
identities of his characters, an issue that is personal to him as well: “[the Indian diaspora] is
very important …once I went to the US, suddenly the Indian connection became very
important: the sense of origins, trying to understand the roots of India that we had inside us.”
(Kanaganayakam 21). This relationship with ‘home,’ very often a constructed imaginary
space, is something that most diasporic writers try to address in their works.
Before concluding I must mention the dangling state of Vassanji in comparison with another Canadian writer of Indian origin, Himani Banerjee. In her introduction to a 1995 volume of essays Himani states:

I have spent half of my life in Toronto, coming no nearer and going no further than I did in the first few years. This journey of mine in Canada is like an arc, suspended, which has not found a ground yet... Other than the language English, which I knew and taught, everything else was not only ‘other’ and alien, but full of denial, rejection and sometimes... downright hatred.

Showing her readers that they can work to change both society and themselves, Himani does not mince her words when she tells us that even Vassanji, the publisher of The Toronto South Asian Review (TSAR, that he and his wife Nurjehan Aziz founded in 1989 and later published under the name of The Toronto Review of Contemporary Writing Abroad) who helped many diasporic writing see the light of day, had made fun of her as a writer in a novel like No New Land. She accused Vassanj and other so-called established and popular South Asian writers in Canada of avoiding direct socio-political issues and treading on safe ground by either romanticizing the mother country that they have left behind or create what Naipaul calls physical India versus the “India of the mind.” She repeatedly draws our attention to the fact that none of the works that have won acclaim actually challenge the Canadian establishment. It was she and other social activists who helped people like Vassanji be what they are today. Whether we agree with Himani Banerjee or not, it is clear that like many other doubly-alienated diasporic writers, Moyez Vassanji will remain like the mythical Trishanku hovering in virtual space for ever. Academics like us will therefore feel free to call him either an expatriate writer of Indian origin, an African writer, a Canadian writer, or a postcolonial writer.

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