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. In order to make sense of his present state, the writer revisits the past by taking recourse to memory and imagination. As Rushdie has noted in his “Imaginary Homelands,” the migrant is always conscious of the fact that “it’s my present that is foreign, and […] the past is home albeit a lost home in a lost city in the mists of lost time.” As the Indian abroad attempts to reclaim the lost home through the ‘double filter’ of ‘time and migration,’ the India that is remembered is no longer the one that was left behind, nor an invented one, but an imagined one:

But if we do look back we must also do so in the knowledge […] that our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the things that were lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind. (10)

This may largely be due, no doubt, to the fact that memory is notoriously unreliable, and frequently discontinuous: “It may be that when the Indian writer who writes from outside India tries to reflect that world, he is obliged to deal in broken mirrors, some of whose fragments have been irretrievably lost.”(10-11) But the shards of the broken glass of nostalgia are not simply a mark of loss; reassembled, they can become, Rushdie believes, a useful tool for the novelist to portray the fractured and liminal exilic condition, the heap of broken images that also sums up contemporary life itself. Besides – and this is something Rushdie does not mention here – the remains of the past are also frequently assembled by the imagination to form a new, and kaleidoscopic, design, one which, in Homi Bhabha’s words, “does not merely recall the past as social cause or aesthetic precedent; it renewes the past, refiguring it as a contingent ‘in-between’ space, that innovates and interrupts the
performance of the present.”(7) It is Stuart Hall who most effectively sums up this point in "Cultural Identity and Diaspora":

Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference [...] It is because this New World is constituted for us as place, a narrative of displacement, that it gives rise so profoundly to a certain imaginary plenitude, recreating the endless desire to return to the 'lost origins' [...] And yet, this 'return to the beginning' is like the imaginary in Lacan – it can neither be fulfilled nor requited, and hence in the beginning of the symbolic, of representation, the infinitely renewable source of desire, memory, myth, search, discovery [...] (235-6)

Sudesh Mishra defines Indian 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 all of his writings, India becomes, to borrow Rushdie’s clichéd phrase again, “Indias of the mind.” 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. When asked by interviewer Susheila Nasta as to how he came to write this novel, Vassanji replied:

There are several ways of looking at that. One is that I live in Canada and at some point I felt a tremendous sense of loss of being away from the place I grew up in, and what I did was try to recreate the life that we lived. But I think a more important motive perhaps is that that life has never been lived...I mean never been written about. It’s something that is slowly being wiped out and as the people who’ve experienced that life die away, die off, then there’s no more record of that life. I think all people should have a sense of themselves, a sense of where they come from, and it just happens that people in East Africa – I think Indians as well as Africans and especially in Tanzania – don’t have that sense, a historical sense, of where they come from. There is a vague kind of oral history telling them where they come from but it’s not something that you read about; it’s something that’s constantly changing, and if you just compare with what goes on in the West, where everything is recorded, you can see that our lives have not been recorded and that’s what I set out to do when I wrote the novel. (70)

Thus in Vassanji’s writings, the feelings about India represent the deeply ambivalent emotions of the Indian “intellectual exile” (to borrow Edward Said’s idea) about the home they have left behind but who cannot help returning to again and again in memory and imagination in their continuing search for identity, acculturation and belonging. After all, as Freud frequently pointed out, it is what comes before, whether in the life of a civilization or in the life of the mind, that organizes the perception of the present. And India is and has
always been a pervasive emotional and psychological presence for “anybody anywhere who has even the most tenuous links” with it, as Amitav Ghosh, another well-known diasporic novelist has discovered for himself: “The mother country simply does not have the cultural means to cut him off.”

*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. In an interview Vassanji tells us that he wrote the stories “with a view to recreate Dar es Salaam where I grew up, during a specific period. And what I thought of doing was just to basically turn off and turn on lights, in a manner of speaking, one by one so each short story would be a flicker of light and then you would have a whole street emerging or a whole city if you like. A few short stories don’t do that but essentially that’s what I as trying to do as that street and that life will in a few years almost be non-existent.” (Nasta, 78) 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. The long-submerged interaction between India,
particularly Western India, and East Africa often surfaces through the tension between the diasporic need for ancestral memories of India and the recognition and acceptance of the ‘mutant’ status of the contemporary Indian-East African. This consciousness of cultural hybridity informs the stories as well as the next novel.

*The Book of Secrets* (1994) that won him the first Giller Prize that same year, is a novel that explores the way the lives of all the people of East Africa, the ‘local’ Africans, the Indian settlers and European colonials constantly intertwine, making the story of each individual, family or community necessarily include that of the other. In it 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. The novel becomes a mosaic in which the distance provided by the diasporic vision reconciles colonial history with personal story, family saga (the story of three generations of Pipa’s family) with an unsolved detective story (How and why does Mariamu steal Corbin’s diary? What is her relationship to Corbin? Who is her son’s father, Corbin or Pipa?) and the social history of three East African colonies over most of the twentieth century, a history that joins together past, present and future, India, Africa and the West, in and through the act of narration. 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. The interest in the novel
centers not on the liminality of the Indian settler, on his anxieties of ethnicity, but rather on
his continuous crossing of ethnic and cultural boundaries; the Indians who have made Kenya
and Tanzania their home, whether Hindu or Muslim, may be deeply rooted in their
individual cultural traditions, which originated in India, but they themselves do not look
back at India. Africa is where they belong, and they refuse to believe that they might ever be
asked to go back there or to choose between Indian and Africa. In this novel Indians only
come to Africa; they do not go back unless they are forced to, like Fernandes’s colleague
and fellow Goan, Desouza, who, having ignored the offer of Tanzanian citizenship, finds he
cannot return there after he goes to India to recuperate following an accident. If they do
leave they emigrate to Europe or America, not to India. Fernandes’s decision to leave
Goa/India was clearly due to reasons or motives he does not acknowledge to himself even
after all these years, preferring, rather to ascribe it to the stereotypical choice of the hybrid
comprador; it is thus a part of his careful erasure of his past. It would seem, then, that his
hazy images of India, his patchy memories of his life there, his easy acculturation in
Tanzania, are at least partly a product of the diasporic ‘guilt’ Rushdie talks about in
“Imaginary Homelands” – “I suspect that there are times when the move seems wrong to us
all, when we seem, to ourselves, post-lapsarian men and women”(25) – which he tries to
suppress, or cover up for, by imagining an India from which he had no option but to move
away from. In Fernandes, then, is suggested the conflicts between the two kinds of diasporic
identity Stuart Hall puts forward, identity as being, which offers a fictive sense of unity and
commonality, which the old Goan tries to believe in, and identity as becoming, which
reveals, instead, the discontinuity in the migrant identity formation. Hall was of course
referring to the Caribbean, but his observations hold true of Africa as well.
Though not a conscious thing, the theme of displacement remains all-pervasive in this novel. The way India is imagined here is at least partly due to the double-distancing of Vassanji’s personal circumstances, his East African Canadian diasporic identity (which accounts for his lack of first-hand knowledge and experience of what it means to be a Goan or an Indian) as well as to his purposes in this novel, which underscores the ambiguity of the colonial experience and the syncretic and hybrid nature of East African identity at a time when the ‘local’ Africans were rejecting the Indian immigrant contribution. 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 community and the native Africans, as well as the colonial administration. It is interesting to note here the significance of Vassanji’s own position as a minority, even within the Islamic tradition of India. As a Muslim, but belonging to a syncretic sect of Islam peculiar to India, the Shamshis (followers of the Aga Khan, who are more often called Khojas, Ismailis and by other names in South Asia), whose rituals traditions and modes of worship exemplify the multicultural world of India as much as they symbolize the border-crossings of its emigrants, the way in which he imagine and re-creates the homeland is different from others, He is both an insider and an outsider at the same time. As Urbashi Barat states, the diary in this novel is “a version of Bhabha’s English Book, and investigating it becomes a part of the Indian diasporic response to the realities of their dislocation in East Africa and their attempt to negotiate new forms of being in these ‘contact zones’ “where disparate cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other” (Mary Louise Pratt’s phrase in Imperial Eyes).”

*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. Nuruddin 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. In the interview given to Susheila Nasta, Vassanji tells us how he wrote the novel “purely for fun” and his main aim was to see how the Asians who left Dar es Salaam for Toronto “coped with their life there” and “how they redefined themselves in Toronto.” He explains:

There are several ways of doing that. There are three men – and they do it in different ways. There is an older person, a middle-aged man who is the main character, and going to Toronto is essentially a liberation. At least after a while he sees it is giving him lots of possibilities but the question that the novel asks is whether he is capable of taking them on. The answer is it’s not possible because he is essentially where he came from and that puts certain restraints or constraints on him and he cannot do everything that he would have liked to do; he cannot break free from the past. And there are two other younger characters who more or less have escaped the past because they’re younger and they have been educated in the West or in the Western style (78-9).

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 the 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:

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. The title itself injects some unease in the reader about a category of people who don’t belong to either of the traditionally opposed and fixed categories against which each defines itself and the other. 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. It instantly reminds one of Abdulrazak Gurnah’s novel *Paradise* (1994) where Gurnah also depicted a pre-colonial urban East Africa in his novel – a fascinating world in which Muslim black Africans, Christian missionaries and Indians from the subcontinent co-exist in a fragile, subtle social hierarchy. The story is dominated by issues of identity and displacement and Gurnah, like Vassanji, addresses these from personalized, human histories. Like the indentured labourers who went to Mauritius, the Caribbean islands, Fiji, and other places to work in colonial sugar plantations, Vassanji’s 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. The characters in this deeply textured novel carry their histories with them wherever they go. Through them, Vassanji offers a moving account of Kenyan history, a history that both stirs emotions because pains of the past and unrewarded present still hurt, a history that also shifts depending on which racial angle one looks at things, a history that refuses to be left behind and migrates with one wherever one goes. Vassanji depicts the Asians as normal citizens with the capacity, like Kenyans of other backgrounds, to build or destroy the nation. To recuperate the interiority of repressed categories of people across the racial divide, his narrative textualizes a familiar history and real subjectivities.

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 a 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. While we sympathize with Vikram and his plight in the inevitable but unaccepted between-ness of situations, we cannot agree with some of the positions he takes while in exile. His thoughts contradict the influential statement by Chelva Kanaganayakam that “to be an expatriate or an exile is not to inhabit in void – it is rather to be granted a special insight, a vision not available to the insider.”

In the novel, characters occupy “in-between” positions. Indians intermarry with Africans to create an interstitial hybrid race; Vikram takes the Mau Mau oath, and Deepa, an Asian child, protects her African playmate Njoroge by hiding him under her bed. Deepa also puts Joseph, Njoroge’s grandson, under the care of Vikram when the African child goes to Canada. Thus the novel bemoans the alienation and incompleteness that attends the inevitable but yet to be accepted “in-between-ness” of the postcolonial and transnational subject. The pleasure of any text (with apologies to Barthes) lies in the way it positions itself between the reader and the author, mediating between the two institutions in a way that gives us agency to participate in the construction of the text’s possible meanings. According to Evan Mwangi, this novel “serves as a middle man in the transactions between the reader and the author. It is bound to be read in different ways, depending on the reader’s ideological positions. Like its cunning narrator, the text is a politely sly narrative that needs to unmask the civility with which it expresses its bitterness about the post-colony.”

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.

When asked by Suchitra Behal about how different this book was from his earlier works, Vassanji categorically stated:

This book is the closest to me after my first novel, *Gunnysack*, which was based in a way on my childhood experiences. But this book felt as close when in fact superficially it is the farthest from my own background. It’s about a Punjabi family and I am not a Punjabi……..It felt very close and it’s a mystery to me why I felt so much in touch with the character. I felt till the last days (laughs) this is a genuine character. Also it’s a book that I felt was most complete after I finished writing it. I won’t say honest, but I didn’t have any inhibitions about it.

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 ‘Trishanku’-like dangling state of Vassanji, as someone residing in an in-between state 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 Vassanji 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 creating 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, an Asian writer, a Canadian writer, or a postcolonial writer.

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