

**THE EMPIRE READS BACK:  
M.G. VASSANJI'S *THE BOOK OF SECRETS***

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The driving impetus behind postcolonial literatures leads not only to technical ingenuity, liminal insights, or polyphonic perspectives, but also, in part, to a retaliatory discursive thrust that attempts setting the record straight. In almost every postcolonial/third worldist narrative, one can discern a political subtext that strives towards articulating a contradistinctive *zeitgeist*. There seems to be an urgency here to compensate for lost times, for denied opportunities, and for blank spaces in the narrative of empire that has erstwhile been occupied by what Michel Foucault calls *le discours dominant* produced by apologists of the colonial enterprise. M.G. Vassanji's novel *The Book of Secrets* (1994) makes its intervention by cleverly creating a colonial text, taking the form of a diary, the titular book of secrets, and then situating it within a context that foregrounds the limitations of the colonial perspective without necessarily condemning it outright.

The novel is set in East Africa during three-quarters of a globally turbulent century of empire building and dismantling. The chronology commences in 1913 with the intrigues and machinations of two empires (the British in Kenya and the German in Tanganyika) determined to outmaneuver each other, thus extending their Great European war with all its carnage into other peoples' lands. Based on a Shahrazadic narrative pattern, this complex, layered novel opens with the narrator Pius Fernandes, a retired Goan schoolteacher of history in Tanzania, being entrusted in 1988 with a diary of an ex-colonial officer, Alfred Corbin, detailing his experiences as a newly-appointed British administrator of a small town on the Kenya/Tanganyika border. This diary functions as a clever interlinking device, not only because it details what Corbin witnessed in 1913-14, but

also because it connects with chains of events that span three generations and spread over three continents.

The novel's pivotal point is the enchanting, enigmatic figure of Mariamu. With a name that recalls the Virgin Mary, she is yet accused of being possessed by Shaitan (the Islamic equivalent of Satan); Corbin rescues her from harrowing exorcism and agrees to employ her temporarily as his housekeeper till she gets married to Pipa (meaning barrel), an ambitious shopkeeper. However, on her wedding night, Pipa accuses her of "impurity," of being deflowered by Corbin, leading to tantalizing suggestions throughout the novel that Mariamu's son, Ali, might be Corbin's, not Pipa's. Curiously, Mariamu's mysterious demise – gruesomely raped and murdered – endows her in Pipa's eyes with such spiritual powers that he erects for her in his shop an expiatory, syncretic shrine combining Hindu and Muslim symbols. Meanwhile, the abandoned child, Ali, is adopted by his Asian granduncle and African grandaunt. Growing into an attractive young man who impersonates in dress and manners Prince Aly Khan, Ali elopes with his Rita (*à la* Rita Hayworth) to England, where he becomes a successful international businessman. Significantly, Ali's mongrelized triple parentage, together with his subsequent triple marriages, symbolizes the three sources of cultural identity for the novel's Indian Muslim community in East Asia (the Isma'ilis, fictionally referred to here as Shamsis): Asia, through historical roots and religion; Africa, through settlement and trade; and Britain, through education and colonial affiliation.

This exciting, at times confusing, cultural hybridity emerges through the detailed drama of the community's triumphs and tragedies. The same community has been the resourceful inspiration of Vassanji's three earlier works of fiction: *The Gunny Sack* (1989), *No New Land* (1991), *Uhuru Street* (1992), and *Amriika* (1999). As there, the novel's political discourse is definitively, if imperceptibly, established. Unwanted and uninvited, the British-German war waged in Africa is not Africa's, but one more byproduct of an arrogant imperial enterprise about which the Africans – despite the heavy sacrifices imposed on them – have no say. As an illustration of this coercive practice, Pipa, in an intriguing twist to the narrative, gets manipulated and/or forced into spying for both the British and German intelligence services during the first world war. The reader feels the fear, suffering, and torture he undergoes while being coopted into a risky, cynical contract that he cannot comprehend.

The coopting is masterminded by a Captain Maynard, the ruthless secret service British officer who proudly code-names himself the Fisi (hyena). As the circumspect, historian-narrator Pius opines, Maynard "loved [Africa] and he hated it, above all he feared it for what it could do to him" (20). In a statement that recalls Kurtz's notorious motto in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, "Exterminate all the savages" (51), Maynard declares, "This is a savage country and could turn you into a savage. It is so easy to be overcome by its savagery, to lose one's veneer of Western civilization. This is what I have learned, what I dread most" (20). This one-dimensional Maynard exhibits no ambiguity in his perception and practices: he associates the white man with authority and order for which he needs to "show strength, fury" because, once again, "this is a savage country, it makes a savage out of you" (21). Through the Corbin/Maynard duality, the author aims at a subtle strategy to illustrate the complexity of the colonial claims: a sort of Apollonian/Dionysian pattern or a Dr. Jekyll/Mr. Hyde game. Accordingly, Vassanji highlights the humanity and civility of Alfred Corbin, a basically decent, if unimaginative individual who pursues a career in the colonial project for which Churchill has exhorted him to give "his whole life and soul" (13). Endowed with "a quiet, forceful diligence, a monastic rigour" (30), Corbin seems genuine enough in his belief that "the British empire, with its experience of ruling other lands and with its humane system, was the best nurturing ground for an emerging nation, for backward Africans and Orientals to enter the society of the civilized" (31). This all-familiar patronizing attitude is represented with milder irony than that of Achebe's compelling rendition of the District Commissioner at the conclusion of *Things Fall Apart*, where the British officer callously ignores Okonkwo's corpse dangling from the tree, while he meditates on "the many years in which he had *toiled* to bring civilization to different parts of Africa" (emphasis added; 147). In his brief for the imperial project, the retired Corbin claims years later, "We went with the best of intentions, to give our best" (329); however, he is also aware of Maynard's crucial role as the empire's iron arm: in a revealing entry in his diary, Corbin admits, "I cannot help thinking that if the Blacks in my caravan decide to butcher me and my Indian, it would be Maynard or someone like him who would be sent to avenge us" (24).

The value of Corbin's diary resides not only in its revelation of the colonial mentality, in its careerist, correct and seemingly benign attitude, but also in its use as a narrative device to instigate and develop subsequent events

while creating occasions for ironic readerly recognition of the rupture between appearance and essence, end and means, intention and results, claim and consequence.

Emblematically, the diary assumes a life of its own that is associated with the name (or spirit) of Mariamu. It was she who took or "stole" the diary together with the pen with which Corbin had been writing. This gesture on the part of the illiterate, silent subaltern represents a daring, subversive act that symbolically signifies a form of resistance, retrieval, and appropriation of the tools of the dominant discourse whose codes are to be deciphered a generation later. To the Africans, Corbin's diary is neither a private possession nor an ordinary item; the act of writing it becomes a mystifying metonymy for imperial power:

*They called it the book of our secrets, kitabu cha siri zetu. Of its writer they said: He steals our souls and locks them away; it is a magic bottle, this book, full of captured spirits; see how he keeps his eyes skinned, this mzungu, observing everything we do; look how meticulously this magician with the hat writes in it, attending to it more regularly than he does to nature, with more passion than he expends on a woman. He takes it with him into forest and on mountain, in war and in peace, hunting a lion or sitting in judgement, and when he sleeps he places one eye upon it, shuts the other. Yes, we should steal this book, if we could, take back our souls, our secrets from him. But the punishment for stealing such a book is harsh – ai! – we have seen it. (1)*

As in *The Gunny Sack*, where "the wonder-filled" sack is anthropomorphized and "appositely nicknamed Sheru, after the resourceful heroine of *Alf Layla wa Layla: 1001 Nights*" (Malak, 1993: 278), the magic "bottle book" (2) here assumes mythological dimensions; as the historian-narrator states, "Because it has no end, this book, it injects us and carries us with it, and so it grows" (2). And grow it does beyond its time: it overreaches its epochal limits as it permeates the past, engulfs the present, and influences the future. Interestingly, the illiterate Pipa sees the diary as a posthumous repository of Mariamu's feelings with whom he tries to communicate in order to expiate his sense of guilt towards her as well as to extricate an answer about his agonizing question concerning whoever fathered Mariamu's son, Ali, nicknamed Aku:

*So this was her gift to him; one which she, one day, some evening in better times, would have shown him had she lived? . . .*

*He was convinced the book contained the answer to his torment. What was the relationship between the ADC and his Mariamu? Was the boy, Aku, really his own? He could not read it, yet he would take this gift with him wherever he went. It was from her and she must be in it, described in it. The book contained her spirit. (172)*

What evolves hereby is a parodic reinvention of the Holy Trinity: Pipa (the father), Ali (the son), and Mariamu (the holy spirit). Moreover, Pipa's Hindu-Muslim shrine for this English text to revere Mariamu (the Africanized Muslim name for Jesus' mother) evokes not only the scriptural, ecumenical dimensions of holy books prevalent in almost all religions, but also the complex cultural and political connections that evolve between the colonizer and the colonized, connections in which the other is conceived (i.e. read) according to codes that fit the reader's perspective.

On the other hand, Pius, the novel's historian-narrator, initially sees the diary as "one forgotten fragment of an addendum to a well-documented history" (7). Realizing that the history of the empire is perhaps not that "well documented," he alters his view:

*Even before I began to pore over Corbin's entries which would subsequently so grip me, I could not help but feel that in some mysterious manner the book touched our lives; was our book. There was, I felt, much more there than the contents of its pages; there was the story of the book itself. Written here amongst us, later perhaps hidden, and now found among us, it must have left a long and secretive trail, a trail that if followed would reveal much about the lives and times it witnessed, and tell us why the diary finally surfaced where it did.*

*I remember my moments of decision exactly – this book, this burden before me. It had, as I sat contemplating it, the aspect of a portal (7-8)*

Mariamamu's appropriation of the diary thus establishes a lasting link between the colonized and the colonizer, a link from which there can be no "clean break" either political, historical, or cultural, even though this unstable link neither remains the same nor disappears altogether (Spurr, 1993: 6-7). Put differently, the act of colonization carries with it unforeseen consequences that go beyond the temporal and spatial dimensions of the act itself. If, as Thomas Richards argues in *The Imperial Archive*, "an empire is by definition and default a nation in overreach" managing "the problems of control at a distance" (1), then naturally the act of forcing the empire to dismantle would carry consequences, moral as well as political, that pursue or haunt the colonizers in the metropolis – well beyond the site of colonial collapse or the moment of raising the flag of independence – through the agencies of migration, political activism, destabilizing discourse, or revisionist historiography.

Apart from the diary and Mariamamu, the novel's central construct of a historian-narrator, Pius Fernandes, lends focus and insight to the complex narrative web of interlinked evocative events pointing in diverse directions. A Goan expatriate teaching history in Africa, Pius is conscious of his ambivalent affiliations. (In fact, few of the major characters in the novel have deep roots in Africa; if any, most are either functionaries and officers of the colonial project or Indian middlemen and traders seeking a better life for themselves in the towns and villages of East Africa.) Recalling and reconstructing past events, retrieving and reading earlier texts, Pius, with his postcolonial sensibility, is able to perceive his rootlessness and reconcile himself with its reality, which for him and for the novel's Shamsi community, is both liberating and tragic. A *de facto* custodian of confidences and consciences, Pius offers his sage, if cautious, political commentary. While he exposes the cruel practices of the colonial past, he occasionally veers into critiquing Africa's neo-colonial condition, before checking himself. He hence describes the country on the brink of its independence, "preparing to transmute . . . [and] bubbling with excitement":

*There was hope in the air, and a cheery confidence, symbolized in the promise of a torch of freedom to be mounted on the summit of Kilimanjaro for all to see, across the continent and beyond. If in later years bush-shirted demagogues waylaid those dreams with arid ideologies, and torpid bureaucrats drained our energies,*

*at least we were spared the butchers . . . But I am losing perspective. (273)*

In another instance, when he describes a serene paradisaal scene on the Kenya-Tanzania border that was once an inter-imperial battlefield, Pius connects colonial war savagery with neo-colonial brutality: "What manner of men would let these slopes be covered with guns, blood, guts? Alien, I say; then remind myself of the carnage our own leaders have wrought on the land" (179). Accordingly, through Pius' cautious critique, the novel's political discourse becomes subtly and problematically formulated as a subtext.

Significantly, the conservatism of this truth-seeking Pius can be linked to a cardinal character failing: he fears taking risks, ideological or personal. To his credit though, Pius recognizes his own limitations and realizes that he has all along been avoiding life's leading existential question posed by the poet Gregory, his alter ego: "Would you do it again, has it been worth it?" (316). Lucidly, if belatedly, Pius thus achieves his own epiphany, thereby mediating a profound and exciting message about the transience and transcendence of being: "to live is to take risk, and so you did not live" (317).

Pius' insights evolve in tandem with his awareness of the shift in his own attitude toward the diary: his impartial search for clues solving its puzzles assumes, in yet another astonishing twist in the narrative, a personal dimension. Rita, his former student and Ali's second wife, claims the diary in order to avoid revealing uncomplimentary aspects of her family's past. Rita's reappearance in Pius' life evokes his erstwhile silent, "impossible" love for her – a love that he dared not proclaim due to ethnic, religious, and social barriers. Now in his old age, Pius appreciates the significance of what his audacious schoolgirls used to reiterate to him: "the world belongs to the one who loves" (317), meaning to the one who *risks* engaging in a love forbidden by a repressive society. As the self-assured, now divorced, Rita impresses upon him, the present and the future can never be disentangled from the past; therefore, her children's *nouveau riche* status in Europe need not be jeopardized by "unnecessary" revelations about the past. In one sense then, Pius' surrender of the diary to Rita represents a *compromise* act, a gesture of genuine loyalty and love, signifying that our reading or telling of history is neither absolute, nor

objective, nor out of context: we often proclaim and endorse that which is most convenient. A human construct, history, as with beauty, is in the eye of the beholder or reader. In another, it represents a *compromising* act, a betrayal of his commitment to truth, however tentative and partial that truth might have been: our narrator's pious pursuit of history veers to a self-gratifying indulgence in *his* story.

What we are witnessing here is the unmasking of the veneer of the aloof, impartial historian who hence has to admit and reconcile his own subjectivity. The surrender of "the book of secrets" is an act of silencing, a perpetuation of a lie. Ironically, in return for the diary, Rita gives him a gift of the newly published poetry book of his late colleague Gregory and an expensive pen which symbolizes the medium of depoliticizing Pius' future meditations while foreclosing the imperial dossier. Here it becomes obvious that the agenda for the neo-colonial comprador class converges with the interests of the apologists of the colonial enterprise through the proactive agencies of discursive constraint, camouflage, silence, or amnesia. The challenge for the reader in such a situation is to recognize the merits and limitations of the novel's historian-narrator: sensitive and sympathetic yet vulnerable and collaborationist.

The impact of Vassanji's novel then is, to borrow an insight from Gayatri Spivak, to dislodge the metropolitan definition through "citation, reinscription, [and] rerouting the historical" (217). If postcolonial literatures (as distinct from postmodernist writings) insist "on the historical as the foundational and all-embracing" (Gugelberger, 1994: 584), then Vassanji's novel does that partly through interpolating Prospero's script "with a Calibanic viewpoint" (Gugelberger, 1994: 581) despite the handicap in the narrator's representativity. As readers we have thus been offered a site of an encounter, of an interaction, with a colonial text which aches for a complementary or countertext; the postcolonial text fills a lacuna and provides a context not only to redress a balance but also to synthesize diverse discursive formations: the erstwhile oppressed, voiceless, or marginalized is now empowered to offer an alternative historiographical perspective that resists closure and "opens directly onto the fractures and contradictions of colonialist epistemology" (Spurr, 1993: 2). Moreover, the postcolonial text, operating well beyond derivative or conflictual praxes, demands new strategies for rereading, reevaluating, and reconstructing, and for taking risks with them – risks that are at once requisite and rewarding.



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