Research Article

Postcolonial Longing: Displacement, Identity, And Belonging In A Delhi Obsession By M.G. Vassanji

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Abstract

This paper argues that contemporary postcolonial fiction must move beyond earlier preoccupations with colonial trauma and exile to confront present realities, including rising nationalism, selective cultural memory, and fragile diasporic ties. M. G. Vassanji's A Delhi Obsession illustrates how questions of home, identity, and belonging become increasingly fraught for those negotiating life between cultures. Focusing on the theme of double displacement, the novel portrays a postcolonial Delhi shaped by communal tensions and cultural exclusion. The study demonstrates how Munir and Mohini's relationship becomes entangled in religious and cultural boundaries that conflict with Munir's remembered homeland. Drawing on Homi K. Bhabha's concepts of "hybridity" and the "unhomely," the paper explores how the novel reimagines home and identity for a twice-displaced diasporic subject. Ultimately, it highlights the tension between the romanticised vision of homeland and secular postcolonial ideals, revealing how spaces once imagined as open to plurality now resist it, reshaping both identity and belonging.

Keywords: Diaspora, Contemporary Postcolonial, Hybridity, Unhomely.

Introduction

Postcolonialism and postcolonial texts have traditionally foregrounded themes of colonial trauma, identity formation, and displacement, as in Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart, which shows how colonialism disrupts and ultimately fractures indigenous culture, identity, and social order. In Salaman Rushdie's Midnight's Children, which explores how personal identity is inseparable from national history and how individual lives are shaped and fragmented by the partition and postcolonial nationhood. In Jhumpa Lahiri's The Namesake, through the character of Gogol, the author shows how a diasporic subject is emotionally and culturally dislocated. However, in a contemporary shift, the landscape of postcolonial fiction is increasingly defined by newer cultural, political, and social conditions, such as rising nationalism, selective memory, fragile diasporic ties, and religious or cultural gatekeeping, that are reshaping how writers interrogate identity, belonging, and home, which reflects what Arjun Appadurai describes as a global condition marked by cultural heterogeneity and constant change, where identities are reshaped through multiple often conflicting influences (Appadurai, 2013,p.16). This is a necessary shift in personal belief.

Moyez G. Vassanji's body of work included nine novels, two short story collections, and two works of nonfiction. Much of his writing engages with themes such as colonial history, migration, diaspora, citizenship, and questions of gender and ethnicity. His earlier works include Gunny Sack, which traces generational memory and identity formation within the East African Indian community, and No New Land, which depicts the challenges of immigrant adaptation and cultural negotiation in Canada. These novels have their focus on the diasporic negotiation of belonging across geographies. In contrast, in his A Delhi Obsession, Vassanji exemplifies the shift. He interrogates what happens when the imagined homeland itself becomes inhospitable, as seen in Munir's growing alienation in Delhi, shaped by surveillance, suspicion and exclusion. In this context, the postcolonial longing may be understood not as simple nostalgia for origins but as a fractured, often unattainable desire for belonging which is shaped by displacement, memory, and historical rupture. As Bhabha suggests, the diasporic subject inhabits an "unhomely"

condition in which boundaries between home and world collapse, producing a sense of estrangement even in familiar spaces. (Bhabha, 1994, p. 13).

Literature Review

While many studies have examined the evolving consciousness of the Indian diaspora, focusing on identity, displacement, belonging, and the shifting significance of India as a cultural homeland, particularly in the words of scholars such as Vijay Mishra, who theorises the "diasporic imaginary, Avtar Barah, who conceptualises diaspora as a site of multiple belonging and Stuart Hall, who views identity as a process shaped by history and culture.

Dongre and Lalwani have shown how Vassanji's novels illustrate the idea that diasporic identity is shaped by the intersection of migration, colonial history, and political change, resulting in a fragmented and unstable sense of belonging across multiple cultural, historical, and political senses. Onsengo and Shiundu offer a useful corrective to diaspora scholarship that focuses primarily on the fact of displacement, arguing that such approaches often overlook the deeper psychological and spiritual dilemmas that immigrants experience after settlement. Ranjana Tripathi argues that Vassanji's works trace an evolving diasporic consciousness, moving from an external struggle for identity and belonging to a deeper internal and psychological engagement with displacement, memory, and origin.

However, while these studies address displacement and identity, they do not sufficiently examine or discuss contemporary political shifts in recent years, such as rising nationalism and cultural surveillance and how they reshape the experience of diasporic return. This paper, therefore, seeks to address this gap by analysing how A Delhi Obsession reconfigures the idea of home within an increasingly exclusionary socio-political context.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

This paper adopts a qualitative, text-based approach grounded in postcolonial and diaspora theory, drawing primarily on Homi K. Bhabha's concepts of hybridity and the unhomely. This framework is used not as a fixed interpretive grid but as a lens through which we can trace how A Delhi Obsession destabilises the conventional postcolonial narrative of return. Bhabha's hybridity offers a way to read Munir and Mohini's relationship as a provisional "third space" of negotiation, while his concept of the unhomely allows for an analysis of how political surveillance collapses the boundary between private and public life, especially of Munir. Methodologically, the paper relies on close textual analysis of Vassanji's novel, supported by secondary critical literature on Vassanji's broader oeuvre and on diaspora studies more generally. Quotations from the primary text are read closely for their thematic and symbolic resonance, particularly moments of confrontation, intimacy, and surveillance that mark shifts in Munir's relationship to "home." This close-reading method is supplemented by engagement with existing scholarship to situate the paper's central claim that Munir's experience exceeds the "double displacement" framework typically used in diaspora criticism and is better understood as a "thrice displacement" within ongoing critical conversations

"We were a community of immigrants in Kenya, he reflected; we came to a country of immigrants. Rootless; ahistorical; and then he saw that young Indian couple move in a few houses away with their daughter, and he thought, I should go to India. Delhi. My grandfather's city. A full circle" (116)

Munir's subjectivity embodies this instability. He was born into a history already marked by migration, as Stuart Hall argues that identity is not fixed but "always in process", shaped by history, memory, and cultural positioning (Hall 222). His return to India suggests a search for the missing piece he has longed for all his life. Though he lived a good life with his wife and child, He somewhat lost himself after the demise of his wife, as it marked the phase of emotional and creative stagnation, "His own writing has turned into dry ground." (1), as his wife was the sole person who motivated him to follow his artistic instinct, which is now lost. In search of his identity, he decided to start from the beginning, where his sense of belonging appeared to be momentarily restored, which was Delhi, his ancestral land. In this sense, his journey aligns with Vijay Mishra's "diasporic imaginary", where the homeland is constructed through longing and memory rather than lived familiarity. (Mishra 5) However, his desire to return and recover is

complicated by what Homi K. Bhabha terms an “unhomely” condition, in which boundaries between home and world become unsettled.

Delhi – a secular, inclusive cultural space full of history and poetry, which Munir had romanticised since his last visit as a young boy. A centre of Indo-Islamic literary culture often associated with figures like Amir Khusro and Mirza Galib (Pritchett), the only place he could think of going, despite being twice-displaced, which would give him emotional consolation. Munir meets Mohini in Delhi, and their relationship develops through a series of encounters marked by conversations, literary exchange, and shared solitude. Their relationship may be understood through Bhabha’s concept of hybridity, as Mohini became a space where cultural differences are negotiated; their interactions created a temporary space of emotional connection within an otherwise unfamiliar environment. However, rather than presenting their relationship as a simple resolution to Munir’s dilemma, the text complicates it by situating their love within broader social and cultural constraints. People like Jetha Lal, who call themselves a so-called “Hindu purifier”(19), had had their eyes on Munir ever since he came to Delhi. Munir suffered frequent covert psychological torture at Jetha Lal’s hands. He became the face that Munir does not recognise- a Delhi ruled by fear, surveillance, and communal policing. He always had an intimidating presence in the lives of Munir and Mohini. Under the pretext of routine cleanup, without his knowledge, his room was checked by authorities (police/ security) with the underlying suspicion of his being dangerous. (68) His quest in Delhi slowly turned into estrangement, as he learned that the homeland he sought exists more in imagination than in reality. His experience suggests that diasporic return does not resolve identity, but it intensifies its instability, exacerbating the gap between memory and lived experience.

With all this happening in his hybrid space, this incident gives rise to a question: “ Do I look like a terrorist to you? Munir asked with a smile. But he was bothered. Couldn’t the cops have waited for him to return ? What did they expect to find, What had they found?”

(68). The intrusion into his room and his subsequent reflections on how authorities expect to find indicate a growing awareness that his identity is being externally defined through communal and political assumptions. The shadow of Jetha Lal, the constant suspicion and surveillance, gave him a sense of “unhomeliness”. This incident left him deeply unsettled; the intrusion into his privacy was not just about the documents or security, it was a reminder or threat that he was being constantly watched. For him, this rude intrusion collapsed the line between his private, intimate life and the public, political climate of Delhi.

This moment also complicates the notion of hybridity within Munir’s experience.

While Bhabha conceptualises hybridity as an in-between space that enables cultural negotiation, Munir's position reveals its limits within a climate of political suspicion (Bhabha 2). Munir’s diasporic and religious identity places him within this hybrid space where, instead of negotiating or openness, he feels vulnerable to misrecognition and surveillance.

His position as neither a full insider nor an outsider makes him feel like a target. At the same time, Munir’s experience exemplifies Bhabha’s notion of the unhomely, in which the boundary between the private and the public collapses and the domestic space is infiltrated by political forces (Bhabha 9). The intrusion into his hotel room was not merely an intrusion but a symbolic violence that transformed a space of intimacy into one of control and fear. His home, once imagined as a site of belonging, no longer feels secure or fully human. He came to India to find his lost self, but instead, he felt even more lost by what was happening to him. The presence of constant suspicion, reinforced by figures like Jetha Lal, meant he could no longer recognise himself as an individual; instead, he was reduced to categories shaped by communal and national anxieties. Instead of a hybrid space of cultural negotiation, it became a site of vulnerability, and the unhomely exposes the impossibility of feeling at home in a homeland that distrusts him.

“She’s a flower of Hinduism. And you are a good Muslim. A pride of the Mohammedans. ….. White women not good fuck? ….. You like beef, sir? Meat of the mother cow?” (212). The confrontation with Jetha Lal intensifies Munir’s experience of exclusion and ideological policy. This led him to think that his identity had been reduced to religious

stereotypes and cultural assumptions, and how he is put into the framework of communal categorisation, where his identity as an individual is not recognised. This deepened his sense of alienation, exposing the limits of belonging in a space increasingly shaped by exclusionary politics. Even in Canada, although his life appeared outwardly stable with his wife, his reflection on their "twenty-five-odd years" (105) marriage suggests an enduring sense of distance, in which their cohabitation never gave him a sense of belonging.

Aileen, his wife, never accepted his family and placed greater importance on her own family (with whom she had little contact). She never welcomed Khadija (his widowed sister) happily, and neither did Munir for the happiness of his wife. When his sister told him, 'I realise it is hard to live two lives; you go ahead and live yours, Brother. Be happy. Jité raho.'

(118) These words ran through his bloodstream like a needle piercing every part of his body.

He felt the change in him; he felt he had lost all feeling of love. After Aileen's death, he discovered he was well in touch with her family, sending presents to her nieces and nephews and even money to her niece, who had made it to the university. His wife supported his career as a writer, and they even built a good, proud life together. But a 'home' he lost in all those years. He was not in touch with his family, and he even went to his home in Nairobi once (since he left his home as a little boy) when his mother passed away (118). He was not in touch with his roots and hence became lost.

Munir's sense of connection to Delhi is initially shaped through an inherited historical memory. His reflection that "He felt pleasantly at ease. He had a bond with this city, a historical connection, vague but real." (66) suggests that his relationship to Delhi is mediated through imagination rather than lived familiarity. This connection is further reinforced through his interactions with Mohini, who appears to offer him more immediate engagement with the city as "she was his other connection to Delhi." (66) However, this attachment must be understood within the framework of double displacement. Double displacement may be understood as a condition of layered dislocation in which individuals are separated not only from their ancestral homeland but also from subsequent settlement spaces, resulting in an unstable sense of identity and belonging. (Kistnareddy; Schwartz). In this novel, the displacement happened with Munir's grandfather. However, his migration was not random but linked to the Delhi Bomb Outrage in 1913 during the British Raj. This migration often made him feel distant from the native people and culture, though he was born there, he did not belong there. This displacement made him more attached to his own culture and his own Delhi, which had been the City of Hearts for centuries.

Munir's migration to Canada introduces a second layer of displacement which can be considered his in his adopted land – his second home, where he built a life with work, marriage and relative stability. However, the novels suggest that this space of settlement does not fully resolve his sense of dislocation. Rather than presenting Canada simply as his "second home", the text presents a more complex condition in which belonging remains partial and negotiated. He met his wife there, in the same bank where they both worked. He was never sure if they had love between them, but twenty-five years was enough to make him realise that he still had the sense of loneliness and distance in him, perhaps because she was just a "rebound from a wound" (48), which suggests that their relationship emerged from emotional vulnerability rather than secure attachment. While Canada provided him with community and structure, it did not eliminate his sense of estrangement from the external world. Instead, it produces what may be understood as a layered form of displacement where settling does not mean belonging. As Brah has argued, diaspora is not simply about relocation but about "the home desire," which does not necessarily equate to feeling at home. While Munir's trajectory can be initially understood in terms of "double displacement", his experience exceeds this framework. His movements across East Africa, Canada, and India do not simply produce two layers of dislocation, but they generate an ongoing condition of instability rather than resolution, which can be understood as a form of "thrice displacement", not as a fixed theoretical category but as a way of describing the cumulative effect of multiple migrations. Each spatial transition generates a new condition of belonging while simultaneously destabilising earlier ones. Rather than completing a "full circle" (116), his return to Delhi reveals that displacement is not a linear process but an ongoing condition in which identity remains fragmented and continuously renegotiated.

Through Mohini, he found a provisional space shaped by shared loneliness and emotional proximity, which he expressed as "a person from a certain place, with a story of his own." (65). But their connection, in turn, raises the question of whether their connection reflects a shared experience or his projection of belonging. The conformation at the club, where Munir is reduced to religious and cultural labels, "you are Muslim, sir…Different" (212) marks a decisive shift from connection to exclusion. This moment reveals that the space, once a site of belonging, is no longer sustainable in an increasingly hostile environment. In this sense, his experience may be understood as a further layer of displacement, where even the possibility of emotional and cultural connection is undermined by external forces. This transformation shows that identity and belonging can never be recovered; it remains unstable and continuously contested.

Because when asked, Munir replied, "…where I am from, what I am, and I find myself at a loss" (53).

"The world is funny. Sometimes it gives you labels you don't need… identity is all the rage now." (132) While Munir and Mohini's relationship seems to cross religious and social boundaries, it ultimately unfolds within what Bhabha terms as "Third Space", where cultural differences are negotiated but never fully resolved (Bhabha, 40). They continued their relationship and parted ways with a promise to meet again in six months or a year, and to write to each other. But this current condition of the Nation, separated them, which is a strange mixture of hope and exhaustion. People are ambitious, constantly on the move, yet weighed down by uncertainty and mounting pressures. Jetha Lal, for instance, from Ahmedabad, just followed Ravi to Delhi, and instead of thinking about his own life, he became a religious vigilante whose demands keep shifting, or he came to Delhi thinking of his children and family, thinking that he could make the nation better for them. However, he is neither serving the country as an army man nor as a politician. He is the common man, and the common man tells the true story of a nation. He represents the millions who always live in the tension and the pull between being modern and traditional, between the pride of belonging to the nation and the fear of being excluded from it. In this way, the current condition of people is marked not by grand declarations but by daily negotiations. So, did Mohini and Munir become the victims of one of these negotiations, did it kill them or liberate them?

"The Express Times reported two days later that a man had been murdered in a quiet spot on the track of the Sikander Gardens." (233) A place that once he called home killed him for finding himself and for loving in today's world, framing him for eating beef in today's Hindu Rāṣṭra.

"Two weeks later, the paper reported that its columnist Mohini Singh had met with the tragic accident on the Outer Ring Road near Hauz Khas. The car caught fire." (233) Indicating that she has now been purified by the fire – "Johar". (234)

Conclusion

The novel A Delhi Obsession moves beyond conventional postcolonial themes of displacement and trauma to address contemporary issues such as rising nationalism, cultural gatekeeping, and fragile diasporic ties. Through the character of Munir, Vassanji explores the instability of identity and the complex search for belonging in the modern postcolonial world. Munir's longing for Delhi and his relationship with Mohini reveal how diasporic individuals remain caught between inherited histories of migration and present-day politics of exclusion. The novel challenges the romanticised notion of homeland by portraying Delhi as a fractured and surveilled space shaped by suspicion and communal anxieties. Munir's experiences illustrate that displacement is not only geographical but also psychological and cultural. By engaging with ideas of hybridity and the "unhomely," the narrative shows identity as a continuous negotiation. Ultimately, the novel presents "home" as a fragile and contested space rather than a stable site of return.

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