



Indian Cultural Aspects in the Novels of M. G. Vassanji

Dr. Kumabal Suneel Kumar

M.A, B.Ed., PGDCA., Ph.D., UGCPDF

Assistant Professor (contract)

Dept. of English

S.V. University

Tirupati, Andhra Pradesh

Abstract: The novels of M. G. Vassanji offer a rich exploration of Indian cultural identity as it evolves across diasporic spaces, particularly in East Africa and North America. His works portray the migration of Indian communities, preserving traditions while negotiating modernity. This article examines how Vassanji reflects Indian cultural values, religious practices, memory, and identity through his fiction.

Introduction

Indian diaspora literature often captures the tension between homeland and host land. M. G. Vassanji stands as a major voice in this tradition. Born in Kenya and raised in Tanzania, Vassanji writes about Indian communities that migrated during colonial rule. His novels such as *The Gunny Sack* and *The Book of Secrets* portray the persistence of Indian cultural elements in foreign landscapes.

Diaspora and Cultural Identity: A central theme in Vassanji's fiction is the formation of identity among Indian migrants. His characters often belong to Gujarati Muslim communities who carry their traditions to Africa.

Cultural identity is portrayed as fluid rather than fixed: The statement that cultural identity is "fluid rather than fixed" suggests that identity is not a permanent or unchanging essence, but something that evolves over time through interaction, migration, and experience. In the novels of M. G. Vassanji, characters constantly negotiate between their Indian heritage and the cultural influences of East Africa and the West, leading to hybrid identities. Rather than holding onto a



single, pure notion of “Indianness,” they adapt, reinterpret, and reshape their traditions in response to new social and historical contexts. This fluidity reflects the realities of diaspora, where identity is continuously reconstructed through memory, displacement, and cultural exchange.

Characters struggle between inherited traditions and new cultural influences

The idea that characters struggle between inherited traditions and new cultural influences highlights the tension experienced by diasporic individuals in negotiating identity. In the novels of M. G. Vassanji, characters are shaped by deeply rooted Indian customs—such as religious practices, family expectations, and community values—while simultaneously being exposed to the social norms of East African and Western societies. This often creates inner conflict, as they must choose between preserving tradition and adapting to modern, multicultural environments. Such struggles reveal the complexities of belonging, where individuals are neither fully anchored in their ancestral culture nor entirely assimilated into the new one, resulting in a dynamic and often fragmented sense of identity.

Memory plays a key role in preserving Indian heritage

The idea that memory plays a key role in preserving Indian heritage emphasizes how cultural continuity is maintained across generations, especially in diasporic contexts. In the works of M. G. Vassanji, memory functions as a vital link to the past, allowing characters to reconnect with their ancestral roots despite geographical displacement. Through stories, family histories, rituals, and personal recollections, individuals reconstruct a sense of “Indianness” that may no longer exist in its original form. Memory thus becomes both a repository of tradition and a creative force, shaping identity by blending past experiences with present realities, ensuring that cultural heritage is not lost but continually

In *The Gunny Sack*, the protagonist Salim reconstructs family history, showing how culture survives through storytelling.

Religion and Spiritual Traditions

Religion is a vital component of Indian culture in Vassanji’s novels.



Islamic traditions of the Khoja community are frequently depicted

The depiction of Islamic traditions of the Khoja community highlights the cultural and religious specificity in the novels of M. G. Vassanji. The Khoja community, with roots in Indian Ismaili Islam, is portrayed through its rituals, communal prayers, religious gatherings, and strong emphasis on faith-based identity. These traditions serve not only as spiritual practices but also as markers of cultural continuity in diasporic settings like East Africa. Vassanji illustrates how adherence to religious customs helps maintain a sense of belonging and cohesion among community members, even as they navigate foreign environments. At the same time, he subtly explores how these traditions evolve, reflecting the dynamic nature of cultural and religious identity.

Rituals, prayers, and community gatherings reflect continuity of belief

The emphasis on rituals, prayers, and community gatherings illustrates how religious practices sustain cultural continuity across generations. In the fiction of M. G. Vassanji, such practices function as collective expressions of faith that reinforce shared identity among diasporic communities. Regular participation in prayers and communal events not only preserves spiritual traditions but also strengthens social bonds, creating a sense of unity and belonging in unfamiliar environments. These repeated acts become carriers of memory and belief, ensuring that cultural values are transmitted and maintained even in the face of displacement and change.

Religion also becomes a marker of identity in multicultural societies. The idea that religion becomes a marker of identity in multicultural societies highlights how faith functions beyond spirituality as a visible sign of cultural belonging. In the novels of M. G. Vassanji, religious affiliation—particularly within the Khoja Muslim community—serves to distinguish individuals within diverse social settings such as East Africa. It provides a sense of collective identity, helping characters maintain continuity with their Indian roots while living among different ethnic and cultural groups. At the same time, religion can also create boundaries, shaping interactions with others and sometimes leading to tension or exclusion. Thus, it operates both as a unifying force within the community and as a defining marker in multicultural environments.



In The Book of Secrets, religious identity intersects with colonial power structures, showing both unity and division.

In *The Book of Secrets*, M. G. Vassanji portrays religious identity as deeply entangled with colonial authority and social hierarchy. Set against the backdrop of British rule in East Africa, the novel reveals how religious affiliations—particularly among Indian Muslim communities—both unite individuals within their own group and simultaneously differentiate them from others, including Europeans and indigenous Africans. While shared faith fosters solidarity and cultural continuity, it also becomes a basis for classification and control within colonial systems. Thus, religion functions in a dual capacity: as a source of communal cohesion and as a factor that reinforces divisions shaped by power, race, and imperial governance.

Family Structure and Social Values: Indian cultural values related to family and kinship are strongly reflected. *‘Extended family systems play a crucial role’* The statement that extended family systems play a crucial role underscores the importance of collective living and shared responsibility in Indian culture. In the novels of M. G. Vassanji, families are not limited to parents and children but include a wider network of relatives who actively participate in each other’s lives. These extended family structures provide emotional security, financial support, and cultural guidance, especially in diasporic settings where individuals rely on community ties for stability. They also serve as key institutions for preserving traditions, passing down values, and maintaining a sense of belonging. However, such systems can also impose expectations and obligations, sometimes restricting individual freedom in the face of changing social conditions.

Respect for elders and tradition shapes character behavior: The idea that respect for elders and tradition shapes character behavior reflects a core aspect of Indian cultural values, where authority and wisdom are associated with age and experience. In the novels of M. G. Vassanji, characters often look to elders for guidance in matters of family, religion, and social conduct. This respect influences important life decisions, including marriage, career choices, and adherence to cultural norms. Traditions passed down by elders act as moral frameworks that regulate behavior and maintain continuity within the community. At the same time, Vassanji also



portrays moments of tension, where younger characters question or resist these expectations, revealing the evolving nature of cultural values in diasporic contexts.

Marriage is often depicted as a social obligation rather than individual choice: The idea that marriage is often depicted as a social obligation rather than an individual choice reflects the collective orientation of Indian cultural values. In the novels of M. G. Vassanji, marriage is not merely a personal or romantic decision but a family-centered institution shaped by community expectations, religious norms, and social status. Elders and relatives frequently play a decisive role in arranging matches, emphasizing compatibility in terms of culture, faith, and lineage rather than individual preference. This portrayal highlights how marriage functions as a means of preserving tradition and maintaining social cohesion within diasporic communities. At the same time, Vassanji also reveals the tensions that arise when personal desires conflict with these obligations, illustrating the struggle between individual agency and collective responsibility.

Vassanji portrays how these values are challenged in diasporic contexts, especially among younger generations.

Language and Oral Tradition

Language acts as a cultural bridge in Vassanji's works: In the novels of M. G. Vassanji, language functions as a powerful cultural bridge that connects diasporic individuals to their Indian roots. The use of Gujarati words, phrases, and expressions within English narratives helps preserve ethnic identity and reinforces a sense of belonging among characters. This linguistic blending reflects the hybridity of diasporic life, where multiple cultural influences coexist. By retaining elements of the mother tongue, characters maintain continuity with their heritage, even while adapting to new linguistic and cultural environments in East Africa or the West.

At the same time, oral storytelling traditions play a crucial role in maintaining history and memory. Vassanji's narratives often shift between past and present, mimicking the structure of oral history where stories are passed down through generations in a non-linear, fragmented manner. Through recollections, anecdotes, and personal histories, characters reconstruct their cultural past and keep it alive. This narrative technique not only preserves collective memory but



also emphasizes that identity is shaped through storytelling, where the boundaries between history and memory remain fluid and interconnected.

This blending of languages reflects hybridity in diasporic life.

Colonial History and Cultural Transformation: Vassanji's novels are deeply rooted in the history of British colonialism in East Africa. The novels of M. G. Vassanji are deeply embedded in the historical context of British colonial rule in East Africa, which brought significant numbers of Indian migrants to the region as traders, clerks, and laborers. In *The Gunny Sack*, Vassanji reflects this migration through family histories that trace the movement of Indian communities across the Indian Ocean. As the narrator observes, "We came from across the sea, carrying our world in little bundles" (Vassanji *The Gunny Sack* 12). This line symbolically captures how migrants transported not only goods but also cultural values, religious beliefs, and social practices, establishing diasporic communities that retained strong ties to their Indian heritage.

Colonial systems in East Africa played a crucial role in shaping social hierarchy and identity, often placing Europeans at the top, Indians in intermediary positions, and Africans at the bottom. In *The Book of Secrets*, Vassanji reveals how such hierarchies structured everyday life and relationships. The colonial archive itself becomes a symbol of power, as seen in the line: "History was what was written down, what was remembered in the records" (Vassanji *The Book of Secrets* 94). This suggests that identity and status were not only socially constructed but also controlled through documentation and institutional authority. Indian communities, though privileged compared to Africans, remained marginal within the colonial system, creating a complex and layered sense of belonging.

Under these colonial pressures, cultural practices were both preserved and transformed. While Indian migrants maintained religious traditions, language, and family structures, they also adapted to new socio-political realities. Vassanji portrays this transformation through characters who negotiate between tradition and change, often modifying customs to fit their new environment. As one character reflects, "We changed without knowing it, holding on and letting go at the same time" (Vassanji *The Book of Secrets* 156). This illustrates how colonial influence



reshaped cultural identity, making it dynamic and hybrid. Thus, Vassanji's novels highlight the interplay between continuity and change, showing how Indian culture evolved within the constraints and opportunities of colonial rule.

In *The Book of Secrets*, archival documents reveal hidden histories of Indian settlers.

Gender Roles and Cultural Expectations: Indian cultural norms regarding gender are critically examined. In the novels of M. G. Vassanji, women are frequently portrayed within traditional domestic roles that reflect deeply rooted Indian cultural norms. They are often associated with the private sphere—managing households, maintaining family honor, and upholding religious and cultural practices. In *The Gunny Sack*, female figures are remembered primarily in relation to family duties and moral expectations, as suggested in the line, “The women kept the house and the stories alive, quietly, without question” (Vassanji *The Gunny Sack* 45). This depiction emphasizes how women function as custodians of culture, ensuring continuity of tradition within diasporic communities.

However, Vassanji does not present these roles as fixed or unquestioned; rather, some female characters resist and subtly redefine the boundaries imposed upon them. In *The Book of Secrets*, women begin to assert their individuality within the constraints of patriarchal and colonial structures. A revealing moment occurs when a character reflects, “She wanted more than the life that had been chosen for her” (Vassanji *The Book of Secrets* 132). This line highlights a growing consciousness among women, indicating their desire for autonomy and self-definition beyond prescribed roles. Such resistance, though often understated, signals a shift in gender dynamics within the diasporic context.

These contrasting portrayals bring out the tension between tradition and modernity, a central concern in Vassanji's work. Gender expectations become a site of conflict where inherited cultural values clash with changing social realities. As one character observes, “We lived between two worlds, unsure which rules to follow” (Vassanji *The Book of Secrets* 178). This illustrates how both men and women navigate evolving norms, but the burden of adjustment often falls more heavily on women. Through these nuanced representations, Vassanji critiques



rigid gender roles while acknowledging the complexities involved in negotiating identity in a rapidly changing, multicultural environment.

Female characters in Vassanji's works symbolize both cultural preservation and transformation.

Memory, Nostalgia, and Homeland: Memory plays a central role in sustaining Indian culture. In the novels of M. G. Vassanji, memory functions as a crucial medium through which Indian culture is preserved and transmitted across generations in the diaspora. Nostalgia for India is often expressed through every day practices such as storytelling, food, and religious rituals, which serve as symbolic connections to the homeland. In *The Gunny Sack*, the narrator reflects on how fragments of the past are preserved through such memories: "Our past lived in stories, in smells, in the things we carried with us" (Vassanji *The Gunny Sack* 28). This suggests that cultural continuity is maintained not through direct contact with India, but through sensory and narrative recollections that recreate a sense of belonging.

Over time, the idea of the homeland transforms into an imagined space rather than a concrete geographical reality. For many characters in *The Book of Secrets*, India exists more vividly in memory than in lived experience. As one character observes, "India was a place we knew without having seen" (Vassanji *The Book of Secrets* 67). This line highlights how the homeland becomes idealized and reconstructed through inherited memories, stories, and cultural practices. Such an imagined homeland allows diasporic individuals to sustain emotional attachment, even when physical return is impossible or unlikely.

Consequently, cultural identity in Vassanji's works is shaped more by remembrance than by direct experience. Characters construct their sense of self through what they have been told, remembered, and imagined about their origins. This process is evident when the narrator notes, "We belonged to a history we could only piece together" (Vassanji *The Gunny Sack* 103). Memory thus becomes both a source of identity and a creative force, enabling individuals to negotiate their place between past and present. Through this emphasis on memory and nostalgia, Vassanji illustrates how Indian culture survives in diaspora as a dynamic, reconstructed reality rather than a fixed inheritance.

This aligns with broader diasporic literature themes.



Conclusion

The novels of M. G. Vassanji present a nuanced portrayal of Indian cultural aspects in a transnational context. His works highlight the resilience of tradition while acknowledging transformation. Through themes of diaspora, religion, family, and memory, Vassanji contributes significantly to the understanding of Indian identity beyond geographical boundaries.

References

- Vassanji, M. G. *The Gunny Sack*. Heinemann, 1989.
- Vassanji, M. G. *The Book of Secrets*. McClelland & Stewart, 1994.
- Mishra, Vijay. *The Literature of the Indian Diaspora*. Routledge, 2007.
- Brah, Avtar. *Cartographies of Diaspora*. Routledge, 1996.
- Rushdie, Salman. *Imaginary Homelands*. Granta Books, 1991.