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The Narrative of Place in M. G. Vassanji's *No New Land* and Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*

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There is an inseparable linkage between places and the individuals inhabiting those places. Each defines and redefines the other. People are known, labeled, recognized and identified according to the place or territory they belong to. May it be a lane, a hamlet, a nation or a continent, the individuals hailing from a specific domain are fastened by an invisible, yet, an inevitable cord stretching from the geographical realm. They carry along the quintessence of their habitation in their name and individuality. Correspondingly, places and territories earn their characteristics from the individuals those reside in. These geographical units derive their social, general and more or less, all vernacular attributes from the denizens.

As a rule, individuals living in a particular geographical space or expanse form a common bond and a community. Sometimes, there are territories which are reserved for persons belonging to a faction sharing similar backgrounds as well. However, the reservation is hardly ever legal, and on the contrary, it is normally based on expediency and social stance. The social dialect of such a neighbourhood varies from others rendering an individual distinction. At the same time, this adhesion created by the dominion furnishes a shared experience and few common characteristics.

These territories accommodating a homogeneous group of inhabitants are one of the general characteristics of immigrant communities in foster lands. China Town in various countries, Canada, US and England is one such exemplifying milieu. There are various other groups of individuals territorising a specific locale as well. However, the immigrants living in clusters are more prominent as they are bind together by cultural ties and common experience. Moreover, communal living in propinquity renders a sense of security and familiarity amidst strangers.

There are writers who cartograph precincts of such community and culture-based territories in their works in general, and fiction in particular. There are many such fictional and existent terrains delineating physical vacuums filled with immigrant and communal experiences. In these literary texts, the milieu supplying a microscopic perspective of macrocosmic awareness constitutes an integral constituent. Moyez G. Vassanji and Monica Ali are two of many such writers who have personified a geographical place with voice, life and personality.

M. G. Vassanji is one of the widely recognized contemporary writers with all-inclusive readership. His narrative dexterity of interlacing phenomenal events with personal histories is one of the most salient features of his writing. Juxtaposition of histories of individual lives alongside actual historical records imparts multilateral cycloramas. In addition to this, he is renowned for his remarkable word-painting of immigrant community and subtlety of their experience in relation to the global awareness. Harold Barratt appreciates, "Vassanji's prose is arresting and energetic. It is not a prose of understatement; it is muscular and of a piece with the sensual and stimulating characters who are people from the African communities he describes with such verve" (447).

Vassanji's *No New Land* (1991) is his second novel, set in Toronto, portraying a group of Indians from Tanzania trying to adapt to life in a new land. The novel demonstrates the conflict between 'adopt' and 'adapt' through few fictional paradigms. The lives and living experience of the tenants of Rosecliffe Park in Don Mills represent these paradigms. It is an intuitive narrative juxtaposing man's capability to 'try and triumph' alongside 'adapt or perish'. Categorically, it is as well a type of documentary rendering the lives of minority immigrants and Canada's multicultural policies.

The setting of the novel is integral and furnish with wide scope for interpretation and understanding. In point of fact, it can be considered as one of the protagonists of the novel, dynamic and confronting the state of affairs. Besides, providing a backdrop, the fictional setting of the novel aids in constructing more or less, a realistic ambiance. Aftermath era of Tanzanian independence and Canadian multicultural policy appears to constitute the time setting. Rosecliffe Park Sixty-nine in particular and Don Mills in general form the corporeal set of the novel. This fictional estate is geographically located in the suburbs of Toronto.

There are several novels which append considerable significance to the geographical background of the narrative and in fact, open the narrative with an elaborate physical description of the same. For instance, Thomas Hardy, A Victorian, nevertheless, contemporary relevant writer, embarks on his fictional narration with detailed particulars of the background setting. Likewise, Vassanji opens his novel, *No New Land* with the physical description of the backdrop with subtleties of colour and size. The novel opens as follows:

Rosecliffe Park Drive runs its entire short length in a curve, along the edge of a rather scenic portion of the Don Valley. It looks over dense woods which give the valley its many moods and colours; in the distance, from among the trees, rises a lone enigmatic smokestack, its activity sporadic and always surprising; a solitary road drops partway down the valley, turns sharply, abruptly ends. A golf course, which appears mostly deserted on the opposite side, lends its simple geometry to the landscape. And down at the

bottom, the Don Valley Parkway winds its way hurriedly to the city, which from this vantage point is represented by the single needle-jab into the sky of the CN Tower. On the side facing the valley the drive itself is lined by apartment buildings identified only by their numbers - the famed "Sixty-five," "Sixty-seven," "Sixty-nine," and "Seventy-one" of Rosecliffe Park - whose renown, because of their inhabitants' connections, reaches well beyond this suburban community, fuelling dreams of emigration in friends and relatives abroad. (1-2)

This is an evocative delineation of the Rosecliffe Park neighbourhood, in order to acquaint the readers with one of the most imperative elements of the narrative. The vicinity is comprised by few high-rise apartment buildings with long drives and steady traffic on the road. However, the narrative lingers on Rosecliffe Park Sixty-nine. The fictional cast composing the plot framework resides in the same locale. Stating differently, Rosecliffe Park Sixty-nine is home to a set of individuals whose experience make up the story line.

Rosecliffe Park Sixty-nine is a high-rise apartment building with three elevators, crowded lobby, domiciliating a group of immigrant families who are Asian-Africans. Being immigrants and minority in number, the individuals huddle together under the safety of the apartment building. Moreover, living in high-rise buildings enables the inhabitants, leastwise, to bridge the difference in lifestyle. Chelva Kanaganayakam comments, "Most of the characters live in the hi-rises in Don Mills, where the security of numbers provides the illusion of 'home' and shelter from an alien society" (56).

There are apparent allusions to the social and cultural framework of Rosecliffe Park which is speckled and pliant. The youngsters take on to the Western trend of lifestyle, including outfit and attitude. What is more, few of the adults to step into modern attire and eating habits. The residents belonging to different Indian cultures vary in their food habits: "The cookers at Sixty-nine are on, full blast. . . . Chappatis and rice, vegetable, potato, and meat curries cooked the Goan, Madrasi, Hyderabad, Guja-rati, and Punjabi ways, channa the Caribbean way, fou-fou the West African way" (65).

Lalanis, Esmail, Nanji, Gulshan and many others comprise the living populace of Rosecliffe Park Sixty-nine. Most of these are Indians hailing from shop-keeper community migrated from East Africa as a result of postindependence antagonism of East African Government towards Asian community. There are the Asian refugees from Uganda as well seeking safe haven in living quarters of Don Mills: "The refugees took shelter and disappeared into the developments of Don Mills, Willowdale, Brampton, and Mississauga there to be joined by fellow Asian immigrants from Africa. (49).

These residents are like human menageries placed in a vitrine, exhibiting overall lineaments and allowing the readers a general inspection of broad-spectrum context. The Lalanis represent a typical immigrant family with unemployment and low income: "But try as he might, Nurdin Lalani could not find a job" (43). The family establishes hints of generation breach between the children and parents facilitating further complications. Nanji is another important character, a well educated individual getting along with a part-time teaching job, acting as the philosophical and intellectual voice of the Rosecliffe Park. Most importantly, Esmail is a victim of racial persecution symbolizing racial chauvinism.

Great expectation is seldom met and disappointments ensue into hard times. The buildings bustling with activities are center of uncertainty and dejection as well. The physical characteristics of these structures articulate the substandard and struggle to survive prevalent in the air: "These buildings, when new and modern the pride of Rosecliffe Park - itself once a symbol of a burgeoning Toronto - now look faded and grey, turning away sullenly from the picturesque scenery behind them to the drab reality in front. Nurdin Lalani's failure to procure employment and the gloominess encircling his abode suggest plight of many. Barely maintained, they exist in a state just this side of dissolution" (2).

Rosecliffe Park Sixty-nine incarnating environmental and social attributes, functions as a viaduct bridging over the distance between prospect and pragmatism. The newcomers arrive bubbling with anticipation and expectation, nonetheless, eventually envisage the reality of confronting impediments. The exhilaration of new-fangled magnificence is truncated by the awareness of an unresolved future: "After their initial excitement, the days of wonder when every brick was exotic and every morning as fresh as the day of creation, came the reckoning with a future that they'd held at bay but was now creeping closer" (43).

The episode of subway station, besides signaling racial prejudice, aids in spotlighting the communal strength of Rosecliffe Park occupants in the novel. This sadistic incident inflicting severe injury to Esmail is more than effective in bringing together the neighbours for empathy and support. People stand up reacting to the unfairness and claim justice on behalf of Esmail. Consequently, a demonstration is arranged: "He said a few emotional words and gave up, tearful, and received once more a standing ovation. . . . There followed a rally the likes of which Don Mills had never seen" (110).

Whatever, the setbacks and complications are, the inhabitants of Rosecliffe Park Sixty-nine have the benefit of a fairytale ending. The problems are resolved and every one lives more or less, contented ever after. The novel adjunct with resentment and harsh experience, culminate on an optimistic note. Arun Singh observes, "The Novel ends with an optimistic note" (85). Pursuing the same vein, Indira Bhatt remarks: "The immigrant no longer remains a rootless, lonely, unwanted person but acquires purpose, meaningfulness in his

life. For him the new land may not be the land of his dreams but still it is a land of promise and new life" (69).

This hopeful ending highlights Rosecliffe Park Sixty-nine as a 'happy home' for the dispossessed and displaced individuals. The scaffold of the apartment building resurrects and resuscitates life among its residents. There is Jamal who after acquiring affluence and standing abandons Rosecliffe Park, in order to uphold his reputation. Jamal escapes from life which he considers 'death': "The two-dimensional world of Sixty-nine and its neighbours was a dead one, a world to escape from. Accordingly, he took his chance when it eventually came" (113). On the other hand, there are folks who live and love the warmth of the buildings.

The reserved circumference of the Rosecliffe Park neighbourhood perhaps resembles a ghetto, however, which is established on communal feeling and sociability. It is not a quarantine containing infection, yet, a sanctuary safeguarding the interest of a few who seem lost amidst a crowd of strangers. It supplies the immigrants with some space to learn, discover and get acquainted with terra incognita. The individuals find a reservoir to stimulate their self-assurance and fend off their qualms. Similar to the youngsters of Rosecliffe Park, the first generation adults reconcile with the circumstances as well.

Undeniably, Rosecliffe Park Sixty-nine performs a vital part in the narrative of the novel, No New Land. This integral setting of the narrative render a backdrop shade for the fictional canvas, increasing the visibility and perceptibility of the readers. It is palpable that the edifice of Rosecliffe Park Sixty-nine is capable to act as a fort and brace its indwellers against the uncongenial and unsettled climate of the new land. Besides providing one of the most important basic needs, shelter, it caters with other amenities as well, specifically, a community, affability, security, social standing and sense of belonging.

Monica Ali is a globally acknowledged contemporary British writer with Bangladeshi ties and second generation immigrant experience. Her debut novel, *Brick Lane* (2003) is regarded as her chef-d'oeuvre and tour de force, garnering her eminence and acclaim. It is a relatively well-known fact that Monica Ali won her prospective publishers goodwill even before she finished her first novel. Unquestionably, Ali's unequivocal writing approach and the delineation of social and personal consciousness has won her an extensive readership. Furthermore, her works have abundance of critical acclamations. Pramod K. Nayar, in one of his articles, remarks: "The community fictions of Monica Ali or Anita Rau Badami (set in diasporic communities in Western cities) can be read as doubly palimpsestic fictions" (197).

Brick Lane, adopted into a film by Sarah Gavron in the year 2007 is one of the most remarkable fictional work of art in the twenty first century. The plot of the novel is

interwoven on the experiences of a Bangladeshi family in the peripheries of London. The major conflict lies within the problem of survival in foreign country and if the protagonist's family be able to return to native soil. The principal plot whirls around the female protagonist, Nazneen Ahmed and her family in present and from the past. She is a dynamic character developing through out the plot.

The setting of the novel, *Brick Lane*, is patently integral, without it, the narrative will stray away from its quintessence. The place limned on Monica Ali's fictional canvas is as important as the characters and the plot. Possibly, it is relatively essential than the other elements as it renders shape and form- voice and life- exclusive of which the theme can be utterly different. The different shades of the place manipulate the mood and intensity of temperament of individuals which is sometimes, hopeful or occasionally, somber. Apart from hopefulness and gloom there are other shades floating in the air of brick lane, explicitly, aggravation, frustration, disappointment, gaiety, compassion and so on.

The epistolary mode of narrative constituted by the letters from Hasina is very important, retracing a simulacrum of homeland and leading an interrogatory perusal into Nazneen's personality. These letters are dated and therefore, it becomes apparent that the novel is set in the late twentieth and early twenty first century. However, there is reference to past as well, as the memories of Nazneen delve into her childhood events. The episode of terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001 is mentioned as well.

Unlike Vassanji's fictional Rosecliffe Park neighbourhood, Brick Lane is real and existent. The geographical setting of the novel is the well-known 'Brick Lane' area in London, renowned for the Bangladeshi population. Geographically describing, Brick Lane is a street in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets, in the East End of London. It runs from Swanfield Street in the northern part of Bethnal Green, crosses Bethnal Green Road, passes through Spitalfields and is linked to Whitechapel High Street to the south by the short stretch of Osborn Street. At present; it is the hub of the city's Bangladeshi-Sylheti community.

The novel depicts Brick Lane neighbourhood with few residence blocks, shops, restaurants and streets. The brick buildings accommodating Bangladeshi immigrants line up the street forming more or less, a full-size communal congregation. The descriptive particulars of the setting are interlaced with the narrative and synchronise with the storyline fastening all loose ends. Nazneen's apartment house forms most important part of the entire setting as it supplies either of the domestic, communal, local and social scenario:

It was hot and the sun fell flat on the metal window frames and glared off the

glass. A red and gold sari hung out of a top-floor flat in Rosemead block. A baby's bib and miniature dungarees lower down. The sign screwed to the brickwork was in stiff English capitals and the curlicues beneath were Bengali. No dumping. No parking. No ball games. Two old men in white panjabi-pyjama and skullcaps walked along the path, slowly, as if they did not want to go where they were going. A thin brown dog sniffed along to the middle of the grass and defecated. (6)

Ahmeds, Razia, Mrs. Islam, a tattooed woman and other residents reside in the Rosemead block and in its vicinity. They live in small apartment houses with one or two bedrooms and a living room jam-packed with furniture. Chanu explains to his wife the state of swarming houses: "Three point five people to one room. That's a council statistic," Chanu told Nazneen. All crammed together. They can't stop having children, or they bring over all their relatives and pack them in like little fish in a tin" (30).

Monica Ali has meticulously described the interior countenance of the living quarters with subtleties. She gives the number and size of furniture to point up the small, inadequate space. She acquaints the readers with the colours of carpets and furniture to provide a vibrant and insightful account: "There were three rugs: red and orange, green and purple brown and blue. The carpet was yellow with a green leaf design. One hundred per cent nylon and, Chanu said, very hard-wearing. The sofa and chairs were the colour of dried cow dung which was a practical colour" (8).

The small and crammed space inside the houses signifies a diminutive position and standing of the indwellers. It implies the contracted world of the residents and especially, the housewives who live all their lives inside the brick walls. As a matter of fact, Nazneen feels suffocated and yearns to go outside her apartment. She finds an escape in her memories of the past which commute her to an open and expansive world. She attempts to flee into a more across-the-board and more all-embracing world of her past by writing and reading letters to her sister in Bangladesh.

Nazneen is always prepared to venture out, either obeying her husband or fleeing from her life which resembles her small dwelling. It appears that she is self-imprisoned and trying to break free. This is evident in her perplexed state of mind and behaviour: "Nazneen walked. She walked to the end of Brick Lane and turned right. . . . From there she took every second right and every second left until she realized she was leaving herself a trail. Then she turned off at random, began to run, limped for a while to save her ankle, and thought she had come in a circle" (35).

The structure of bricks is undoubtedly a refuge to many Bangladeshi immigrants, providing

shelter and a community. However, these brick buildings are the source of boredom and frustration to a few as well. Nazneen feels utterly trapped, lost and helpless in the security of her own abode. Tediousness, ennui and insufficient breathing space augment her discontent: "You can spread your soul over a paddy field, you can whisper to a mango tree, you can feel the earth beneath your toes and know that this is the place, the place where it begins and ends. But what can you tell to a pile of bricks? The bricks will not be moved" (58).

Brick lane neighbourhood accommodates many unsatisfied and dejected indwellers who are rummaging for opportunities, however, in vain. Razia's husband is employed in a menial job and Chanu Ahmed, despite his high educational qualification and scholarship is out of work. "These days, with the children at school and Chanu littering the sitting room, Nazneen often retreated to the kitchen, or sat in the bedroom until the wardrobe drove her out to wander around the flat with a damp cloth, wiping and straightening. He showed no sign of getting a job" (131).

Nonetheless, Brick Lane provides a concrete fulcrum support to hold on and epitomizes assistance. Nazneen is able to come to terms with her circumstances and resolves to carry on supporting her family, no matter what it takes. She realises the pointlessness of living in past and determines to live in present and envisage future which lies with her children. Therefore, she decides to renounce her return and stay back in London, cherishing the present and securing the future. Brick Lane espouses both the roles of a harbour and lighthouse, guiding and anchoring the traveling lives.

M. G. Vassanji's Rosecliffe Park in *No New Land* and Monica Ali's Brick Lane in the novel, *Brick Lane* representing standalone worlds of a few individuals, leave an indelible impression on the readers. The lives of a particular set of individuals embedded underneath and flanked between the physical properties of these geographical locations are transcribed and decoded leading to multifarious cogitations. Tout ensemble, an exploratory tour of Rosecliffe Park and Brick Lane renders experiences of individuals alongside pulsating accounts and enable a more insightful reading of these literary texts.

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