

Men in the Land of Promise: Immigration and Challenges to Masculinity in M.G. Vassanji's *No New Land*

by

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Abstract

A person's gender is an important part of their identity as it affects almost all aspects of our lives. Not all men subscribe to the virtues and characteristics of hegemonic masculinity, but it exerts its influence on them through cultural and institutional practices. With masculinity playing such an important role in the lives of men and the influence its impact will have on women and children, this paper finds out how masculinity is portrayed in Vassanji's *No New Land* and how immigration to foreign lands reinforces or challenges men's masculinity. This is done through an analysis of the portrayal of key male figures in Vassanji's *No New Land* which gives glimpses of two different cultures and enables a transnational and transcultural comparison of the effects of masculinity on men who migrate to different cultures. With gender studies often giving little recognition to the challenges men face compared to the challenges women face under patriarchy, this paper contributes to the growing scholarship on the challenges of men under patriarchy.

M. G. Vassanji notes in *No New Land* that "We are but creatures of our origins, and however stalwartly we march forward, paving new roads, seeking new worlds, the ghosts from our past stand not far behind and are not easily shaken off" (9). Being creatures of our past and the ghosts of our past not being far behind is the motivation for this paper which seeks to explore the portrayal of masculinity in Vassanji's *No New Land* in order to unearth how migration to a foreign land reinforces or challenges men's masculinity. This paper therefore seeks to explore how men deal with the ghosts of their past in relation to their socialization concerning masculinity as they encounter new forms of masculinity in a new land that reinforces or challenges their notions of masculinity.

This is done through an analysis of the characterization of key male figures in *No New Land*. These male figures are Nurdin, Jamal and Nanji. A look at how these male characters face the challenges or reinforcements to their masculinity is important, as “the narrative of migration intensifies the pressure for adaptation since one culture’s requirements of its male subjects will be somewhat different from another’s” (Daniel Coleman, 160).

A person’s identity is an important part of who the person is. One of the key parts of a person’s identity is gender as it influences almost all aspects of a person’s life. This is succinctly captured by Mamphela Ramphele who notes in “Teach me how to be a man” that “identity formation in almost all cultures is modeled on ideals of what it means to be a man or woman” (1). Her argument is further supported by Linda Lindsey who also posits in *Gender Roles: A Sociological Perspective* that, “acquired by ascription, the status of female or male is a master status in that it is one which will affect almost every aspect of our lives” (2). If gender is so key to a person’s life and affects almost all aspects of a person’s life, one then begins to wonder what migration does to a person’s sense of masculinity and femininity, as gender is socially constructed and therefore each society has its social expectations in relation to masculinity and femininity. Daniel Coleman therefore says in his book on masculine migrations that he chooses to focus attention on men’s narratives of migration because “international migration troubles the immigrant’s relation to cultural norms, and in the disjuncture, in the re-evaluation and reassessment that the migrant male undergoes as a result of cross-cultural refraction, many of the masculine ideologies that so often remain assumed become objects of conscious attention” (p7). He further notes that “when men emigrate, they take a familiar, though not necessarily unified, set of masculine practices with them; when they immigrate, they encounter a second, less familiar set of masculine practices. Migration thus involves a process of cross cultural refraction” (p3). This paper therefore builds on Daniel Coleman’s research on men and migration by looking at how men face their masculinity being challenged or reinforced in the African diaspora.

The place of gender in a person’s life cannot be understated. Tanure Ojaide defines masculinity as “a conglomerate of virtues and characteristics built around the traditional expectations of being a man and the glorification of virile values. These qualities, sometimes related to warrior virtues are not only integral parts of the culture but are also seen by people as meeting established rules of behaviour/conduct and the action of men” (66). These established rules of behaviour are also known as hegemonic masculinity. Even though not all men consciously subscribe to hegemonic masculinity, it exerts influence through cultural and institutional practices and has strong roots in patriarchy. It favours toughness, physical strength and aggression. Scott Harrison notes that

“patriarchy therefore affects men as much as women. Men are oppressed and isolated by the models to which they are expected to conform. Men struggle to prove themselves to be men and the penalties for failing to do so are considerable. They are teased, isolated and forced into constant competition in drinking, sport, womanizing and risk-taking behaviours. Masculine identities often expect men to curtail their lifestyles in order to conform. Gender studies have not always recognized the damage done to men under patriarchy” (29).

One of the main motivations for my study is the little recognition that gender studies gives to the damage done to men in a bid to curtail negative gender notions as they have often emphasized on the damage done to women under patriarchy. In addition, as Tommy curry notes, Black masculinity has its tensions and has been perceived in some quarters as a passion to achieve white masculinity, a myth which continues to be perpetuated by some scholars, who continue to deny the existence of multiple masculinities among Black men (3).

The novel was selected because it gives glimpses into the Tanzanian and Canadian cultures and enables a comparison between the masculinities of the two cultures and how immigration to a new culture can challenge or reinforce masculinity. Even though Vassanji’s novel is not representative of all novels dealing with issues of immigration, it is hoped that this paper will be a catalyst to further research on the effects of immigration on masculinity and how men are also affected by immigration. As Rocio Davis notes, “An important part of Canadian multicultural literature deals with the process of achieving selfhood for the between world subject. Many of the writers question through their fiction what determines identity and creates community, signaling how geographical, ethnic, political and cultural makeup and differences serve as signifying aspects of this complex self” (7).

This paper will make use of Judith Butler’s theory on the performativity of gender. Judith Butler’s theory of the performativity of gender is built on Simone de Beauvoir’s assertion that “one is not born a woman, but rather becomes one”. In her book, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and Subversion of Identity*, Judith Butler makes the assertion that “the view that gender is performative sought to show that what we take to be an internal essence of gender is manufactured through a sustained set of acts, posited through the gendered stylization of the body” (xv). She adds, “Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (45). Within the performance of gender, there is masculinity and femininity. Judith Butler’s theory is useful for this paper as it enables masculinity to be analyzed as it is portrayed in two cultures: Dar es Salaam and Toronto. The portrayal of men in the two cultures therefore portrays the expectations of the male gender in the two cultures. As Daniel Coleman notes on the theory of the performativity of gender, “Judith butler’s theory gives credence to cultural and genealogical analysis of masculinities.

Masculine migrations are about men's negotiation of social constraints and their innovations within these constraints" (159). This research is significant because as Akosua Adomako Ampofo, Michael Okyerefo and Michael Pervarah note, masculinity studies gained grounds in the 1980s when feminists pointed to the importance of understanding the ways in which men experience and enact gender (59). There is therefore a lot more to be unearthed in relation to how men experience and enact gender in the face of challenges or reinforcements to their gender in new lands, which Carroll Smith-Rosenberg (2011) writes of as being perceived as "performed, not real" in the face of multiple expressions of masculinity from various cultures being represented in the same geographical space.

In *No New Land*, Nurdin and his wife seek greener pastures in Canada. Before their journey to Canada, Nurdin was an employee of Bata Shoe Company while Zera ran a shop. Nurdin felt satisfied in life because he had a good market as a salesman for a shoe company and had two children and a wife who readers are told respected him and was affectionate to him. Therefore, Nurdin always felt good going back home to his wife and children. Upon their arrival in Canada, readers are told that the goal of the family is that "first the man of the household had to get work befitting his status. But try as he might, Nurdin Lalani could not find a job" (43). Unfortunately for Nurdin, within a week after arriving in Canada, his two children were enrolled in school and his wife found a job as a receptionist. This left Nurdin, the man of the house, and the one who used to be the breadwinner of the house, in a very difficult position as he could not play his role. Readers are told that many times after going in search of a job, Nurdin returned home dejected and plunged into deeper despair. This is because of the implications not having a job had on his ability to play his role as breadwinner of his family and its implications on his masculinity. To add to his frustration, readers are told that, by the time Zera returned home from work, Nurdin would be disheveled and tired because he had to go home and wait for the kids, clean up the house, do the laundry and anything else that had to be done in the house in order not to feel useless. This, unfortunately, was a situation Nurdin had never been in because as Nurdin says, in Dar, even his glass of water was brought by a servant and there was a servant to pick up the children from school. Nurdin therefore saw himself as a servant when he had to play the various roles he had played in Canada in order to make some money for his family. He had carried cases on his back, pressed trousers, cooked French fries, and swept and mopped floors. And as Vassanji sums it all up, "you could weep" (89). With Nurdin seeing himself as a servant, he was reluctant to stoop any lower on the ladder of self-esteem. Nurdin was therefore unhappy to be offered a job which entailed that he clean tables in a restaurant, as he saw it as servanthood. He was therefore very offended when he was offered a mop to clean the floor of the restaurant and flatly refused to do as ordered. As readers are told, "it seemed to Nurdin he had come down in self-esteem and expectation, grasping whatever odd job came his way, becoming a menial in the process" (88). Despite becoming a menial labourer, Nurdin was reluctant to accept any job that he deemed beneath his dignity as a man.

When Nurdin finally gets a job at the Ontario Addiction Center, even though the job is not up to his expected standards, he accepts it because the pay was not bad and the benefits were good. As Vassanji says, “they could have made him wear Khaki in Dar for such a job” (122). He therefore sees it as an upgrade on the same job in Dar and, also the good conditions of service served as a boost to his masculinity as it enhanced his finances. As Vassanji says after Nurdin gets a job, “For Nurdin Lalani, a new life had begun with his job at the Ontario Addiction Center. With it, he had accepted a station in life – not one he believed he deserved but one which would have to do. At least, he could say that he had a job” (126). This was so important to him that Zera suggests that he tell people he was a manager at his workplace because he manages supply rooms.

Nurdin and his family encounter Nanji in Canada. Nanji was a brilliant young man who had won a scholarship to a prestigious American University. He was teaching evening courses at Woodsworth College. As Vassanji says, “it did inflame Nanji sometimes the way he was taken for a labourer and even a shopkeeper” (79). Nanji felt that way because he felt his job sustained his masculine ideals unlike the work of a labourer or shopkeeper. During a scenario when Esmail gets attacked while Nanji was around but could not help, Nanji goes home feeling numb and depressed. As Vassanji says of Nanji, “what ached him was his own behaviour during the attack because he had not moved or uttered a word to help” (97). As a result of this, he felt like a coward. This was a challenge to his masculinity as it did not meet the virile expectations in his mind of how a man should behave. Nanji is therefore pleased when Jamal tells him that he urinated on a woman he had slept with because she asked him why “Pakis” like him always come to Canada. Jamal reacts this way because he is not from Pakistan or Asia and feels insulted by being referred to as such. As Vassanji says, “he (Nanji) was impressed, not at the exhibition but at the sheer energy and anger expressed” (106). Nanji therefore felt that Jamal was exhibiting his masculinity, unlike him. He was therefore impressed with Jamal’s exhibition of masculinity. Later in the story, the narrator states that “Nanji watched Jamal go with a sense of envy eating deep inside because Jamal was going into the world to conquer it” (115). This envy out of the sense of going out to conquer makes readers see that Nanji sees Jamal as “a man”, a man who walks with his head high because he exhibits virile qualities and is therefore able to conquer. Nanji is therefore very pleased when later in the story, Jamal and his wife, Nasim, visit him at home after he had improved the condition of his living quarters and are impressed. He feels even more like a man when Jamal tells him, “this is it. Now you are beginning to live” (161). Jamal’s words express Nanji’s deep-seated desire for his climbing up the social ladder to be appreciated as it boosts his ego and makes him feel manlier.

Jamal is another immigrant, like Nurdin, who settles in Toronto after escaping from Tanzania. He had been a lawyer with the government back in Dar but had had to escape after he was warned of a plot against his life. In Toronto, he began life selling samosas to a tuck-shop in order to meet his financial needs. Because he felt the selling of samosas was beneath him, he hid the samosas in his briefcase, the same briefcase in which he used to carry government files in Dar. Selling samosas was an ordeal he saw himself as having to endure till he could climb the social ladder to where he felt he belonged.

When Jamal rises to become a lawyer in Toronto, he expresses his masculinity by distancing himself from the people of Rosecliffe Park in order for his achievement to be publicly acknowledged. Vassanji therefore tells readers that Jamal insisted that “there was a proper distance between a lawyer and a client. Professional conduct demanded it” (160). He therefore placed his secretary and wife as “roadblocks” to reduce access to him. The same people he used to move with and chat with were no longer up to his class, and his accomplishment as a lawyer was a boost to his masculinity which he had to flaunt by distancing himself from them.

The actions and inactions of the three male characters in *No New Land* are significant for these diasporic subjects, as being in the diaspora puts them in a position in which their masculinity is either challenged or reinforced due to different cultural definitions of masculinity. As Jonathan Rollins notes in Asma Sayed’s edited collection of essays on the works of M. G. Vassanji, when the Lalanis arrive in Canada and are faced with the reality of low temperatures in Toronto, they go out to buy warm winter clothes the next day, but in doing so, they do not discard the clothes they brought from Tanzania. The new clothes are only a supplement to what they brought. He therefore compares the past and the present to an accumulation of clothing which results in the clothing from the past being completely discarded at a point. Identity is also seen as comparable to a wardrobe flux (147-148). This is because people in the diaspora initially arrive with the identity of their past. With time, they realize that they have to unlearn some things from their past as they learn new ones in order to enjoy their new surroundings and survive in their new environment. They are just like Nurdin of whom Vassanji says, “Barring a few phantoms of thought, he had been satisfied. But now, he felt tremors of change inside him, and new yearnings” (84). These men in the diaspora initially try to survive in their new home on their old conceptualizations of masculinity, but with time, they realize that they will have to let go of parts of their old self if they are to satisfy the new yearning within them. This takes place till they are so transformed that they meet the social expectations of their new home more than that of their former home. Like Nurdin, who had difficulty overcoming his masculine ideals and therefore found it difficult settling on a job, a time comes when the Nurdins in the diaspora realize that it is more important to have a job than to satisfy masculine ideals which do not apply in their new land. Nurdin finally settles on a job which even though he sees as beneath him, he accepts because of the financial benefits and other rewards he got by doing it. This is a job which he compares to a servant’s work in Dar and one which would have required he wear a uniform. In Toronto, he was not required to wear a uniform and was receiving more entitlements than someone of the same rank in Dar. As his wife suggests, he sees himself as a manager of supplies in order to mentally accept the job as meeting his standards of masculinity. In addition, the good salary enables him to be the breadwinner he so desperately wants to be for his family. As a result of his inability to provide for his family, he loses the respect of his children and his wife who seeks solace in religion and therefore ceases to have sexual relations with him for years, which results in sexual frustration for Nurdin.

As Gwendolyn Etter-Lewis notes, “in all cultures from the moment a person is born, being identified as a boy or girl, determines how the person will be treated, will be expected to behave and expected to see the world” (168). Akosua Adomako Ampofo and John Boateng in their article, “Becoming an Adult: The Training of Children in Ghana,” also note that,

“The delineation that is made when a child is born plays a very important role in the life of this baby because every society has prescriptions for appropriate characteristics, behaviours, and forms of social intercourse of its members – the young and the old, nobles and commoners, black and white, married and unmarried, females and males, and all of these are under-girded by gendered expectations. These prescriptions and expectations are embedded in the societies’ institutions ranging from the family, through schools, to religious and political institutions and systems” (245).

Nurdin comes from a culture in which a man must work to take care of his family. He is also from a family of good social standing. Being in a position where he felt like a liability to his family and therefore having to play his wife’s domestic roles at home was therefore humiliating. Being offered a job in the public domain that entailed doing work his mind had constructed as “female work” was not only humiliating but insulting as well. His reaction of refusing to mop the floor in the public domain is therefore his physical expression of the pent-up frustration as a result of the humiliation of continually being offered jobs he feels are beneath him and having to play roles he considers feminine. Kristina Rungano in *Women Writing Africa* sums up the domestic and conjugal roles of a woman in Zimbabwe in this poem:

THE WOMAN

A minute ago, I came from the well
Where young women drew water like myself
My body was weary and my heart tired.
For a moment, I watched the stream that rushed before me;
And thought how fresh the smell of flowers,
How young the grass around it.
And yet again I heard the sound of duty
Which ground on me – made me feel aged
As I bore the great big mud container on my head
Like a great big painful umbrella.
Then I got home and cooked your meal
For you had been out drinking the pleasures of the flesh
While I toiled in the fields.
Under the angry vigilance of the sun
A labour shared only by the bearings of my womb.
I washed the dishes; yours
And swept the room we shared
Before I set forth to prepare your bedding
In the finest corner of the hut
Which was bathed by the sweet smell of dung
I had this morning applied to the floors
Then you came in,
In your drunken lust
And you made your demands
When I explained how tired I was
And how I feared for the child – yours; I carried
You beat me and had your way
At that moment
You left me unhappy and bitter
And I hated you;
Yet tomorrow I shall again wake up to you
Milk the cow, plough the land and cook your food,
You shall again be my Lord
For isn't it right that a woman should obey,
Love, serve, and honour her man?
For are you not the fruit of the land? ((385))

In this poem, the roles of the woman listed are: to cook, fetch water for use in the house, wash the dishes, prepare the bed, satisfy her husband sexually, milk the cows, plough the land, carry the man's children in her womb and take care of his children. Domestically, a woman is expected to cook, wash the dishes, fetch water for the house and prepare the bed. G. K. Nukunya in *Tradition and Change in Ghana* lists the duties of the husband as ability to satisfy his wife sexually, treating his wife with love, kindness, and understanding, giving regular gifts to his wife and taking responsibility, particularly for all her troubles including debts. Kwame Gyekye in *African Cultural Values* puts fulfilling marital responsibility particularly in providing for the material welfare of a wife (or wives) and children, as the most important role of a man in marriage (77). It is therefore obvious that when Nurdin and Zera arrive in Canada, they swap roles in terms of their expected responsibilities as husband and wife. While this enhances Zera's status and enhances her possibilities in Canada, Nurdin frustratingly endures a diminished status as a husband due to diminished economic possibilities due to his gender. His inability to have sexual relations with his wife is a further blow to his masculinity as it prevents him from satisfying his wife sexually, which as earlier indicated, is one of the expectations he is supposed to meet as a husband. This affects Nurdin to the point where he attends peep shows with a work colleague and almost commits adultery in order to satisfy his sexual desire to feel like a man again: one who is capable of satisfying a woman sexually.

Daniel Coleman notes in *Masculine Migrations* that he focuses on the disruptions that migration brings to men because "sometimes, these disruptions are caused by the inflections that occur when a male character tries to adapt the masculine practices of a familiar culture to an unfamiliar one. Other times, this adaptive behaviour reveals itself in discomfort under, or sometimes conflict between, inherited or imposed codes of masculinity" (161). His argument is supported by M. G. Vassanji himself who notes in an interview with Shane Rhodes that "the people who come to Canada are not just Canadian content; they bring with them their own intricate pasts" (p6). This further supports the argument this paper makes that men in the African diaspora face challenges to their masculinity as a result of finding themselves in a different culture with different ideals of masculinity.

The epigraph to *No New Land*, "The City", which is a poem by C. P. Cavafy, reads,

You tell yourself I'll be gone
To some other land, some other sea
To a city lovelier than this...

There's no new land, my friend,
No new sea; for the city will follow you
In the same streets you'll wander endlessly...
(Constantine Cavafy, "The City")

Jonathan Rollins notes in relation to this epigraph that “the false promise of the fresh start or amnesiac self-reinvention in a new place is summarized in the epigraph in *No New Land* (157). In *No New Land* Nurdin and Jamal see a fresh start full of promise in Canada. They do not foresee the challenges to their masculinity. They rather see a new land full of promise which will be a boost to their masculinity. Nurdin does not foresee himself doing household chores or doing menial jobs. Jamal also did not foresee himself going to Canada to hide samosas in his suitcase to sell to a tuck-shop. He saw himself as going to a land where he could fulfill his dreams. The difference between Jamal and Nurdin is that while Jamal used his time of selling samosas and being looked down on as fuel for his dreams, Nurdin settled for whatever he could lay his hands on, while being choosy with what was on offer as well. Jamal was willing to take some steps down the ladder in order to fulfill his dream of being up the ladder where he could puff his chest and put his hand on his chest as having made it as a man and as an expression of his masculinity. By the end of the story, he is a lawyer with a fancy home, a fancy car, dressing in fancy clothes and moving with those in the upper echelons of society. Nurdin, on the other hand, has dreams but is not willing to face the challenges to his masculinity. He therefore spends more time sulking and venting his frustrations rather than looking at how his frustrations at the challenges to his masculinity can be channeled toward fulfilling his dreams or using his frustrations as fuel to work harder towards fulfilling his dreams. He therefore remains within the same social circle within which he starts by the end of the story. He is unable to climb the social ladder as he resents the things he has to do at the initial stages in order to achieve his dreams because he continues to hold on to the ideals of masculinity from Tanzania. By doing so, he loses the respect and affection of his wife and children. Nanji is portrayed in the story as a part-time teacher in a university who is living in a not so well-to-do neighbourhood and in an improperly furnished apartment. By the end of the story, he is portrayed as moving gradually up the social ladder, which is evidenced by Jamal and his wife’s impression of his apartment.

Fiaveh notes in his study, “Hegemonic Penile Discourses and Continuities in Penile Conceptualizations,” that “the penile discourse in Ghana is dependent on factors such as demographic profile, penile characteristics, health conditions, social factors and myths and misconceptions” (190). While these factors influence people’s ideas on masculinity in relation to sexual performance, similar factors like a person’s demographic profile, health condition, social factors, myths and misconceptions influence Black men’s masculinity whether at home or in the African diaspora and their ability to adapt in new environments. It can be concluded therefore that many African diasporic men who migrate have their masculinity challenged especially in their conjugal and parental roles as bread winners and also in the kind of jobs on offer in their new lands especially in Western contexts. Those who are able to face these challenges, like Jamal, end up rising up the social ladder after a period of stepping down the ladder as far as their past culture is concerned in order to meet the demands of their new society. Those like Nurdin who hold on to their past ideals of masculinity remain low on the social ladder.

They are therefore unable to meet the expectations of masculinity of their former societies in the new land or to meet the expectations of masculinity in their new home, which results in them accepting anything on offer and trying to convince themselves that it meets their expectations and satisfies their expectations of masculinity. The final group, like Nanji, have the potential and the foundations in place, but like Nanji, they need a push in order to work towards their potential. Just as Nanji begins to furnish his apartment better and climb bit by bit up the ladder, these people, once they are motivated, can work hard to fulfill their goals and are able to overcome the fears and moments when they feel paralyzed and emasculated.

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