

## The Untold Stories behind Tearful Eyes in M.G. VasANJI's "And Home Was Kariakoo: A Memoir of an Indian African"

**Veerababu Maridi**

Lecturer, St. Joseph University in Tanzania.

[veerumaridi@gmail.com](mailto:veerumaridi@gmail.com)

**D. Jyothirmai**

Research Supervisor, Department of English, Adikavi Nannaya University, Rajahmundry, India

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**Abstract**

Writing history about one's own country is much easier than documenting the same diaspora in a foreign land. As it happened somewhere, most of their stories might go unnoticed, neglected or censored. It is the greatness of any writer to depict the antiquities with all possible facts without hurting the sentiments of the natives of those nations. One such genuine attempt was made by Indian-origin Tanzanian writer M.G.VasANJI. His memoir "And Home Was Kariakoo" is the best example for displaying us the predicament of the Indian diaspora on the Tanzanian soil. In this research we testify those alienations, migrations, disposessions and ordeals of Indian migrants in East Africa are actualities which were little noticed by the rest of the world. To manifest those certitudes, the authors of the research referred number of other articles, books and visited some of the places which were mentioned by M.G. VasANJI in his book. We then wrapped up by canvassing VasANJI's "And Home Was Kariakoo: A memoir by An Indian African" is a testimony to know the adversities of Asian aliens in East Africa.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

M.G. VasANJI (Moyez GulamhusseinVasANJI) is Indian rooted Tanzanian – Canadian writer. His parents migrated from India to Kenya in 1940s and he was born in Nairobi, Kenya. His family shifted to Dar Es Salaam, Tanzania due to the political unrest in Kenya when VasANJI was 5 years old. He was raised in Tanzania and went to USA for higher education and then settled in Canada. Thus, it is not an exaggeration to state that VasANJI experienced double alienation being an Indian in Africa and being an African-Indian in America. His life as a child of Indian migrants in Africa and his exodus to US is the raw material with which he wrote ten novels, three stories and four non-fiction/memoirs. One of his notable non-fictions is "And Home was Kariakoo: A memoir of an Indian African". Great African writer Chinua Achebe aptly described the quality of good writer as the story teller creates memory that the survivors must have –otherwise the survivors would have no meaning (Chinua Achebe and Nairobi Half-life by Hyben Bixbi – 2013). VasANJI did explicitly the same as he had picked themes from existing lives in his fictional writings such as: alienation of Indian Diaspora,

**The Untold Stories behind Tearful Eyes in M.G. VasANJI's "And Home Was Kariakoo: A Memoir of an Indian African"**

cultural discrepancies on African loam, the rise of Indian merchants in East Africa, preponderance of Indian workers in the development of roads and railway lines, Independence of African nations, effect of their policies over Indian exodus and the consequential forced migration of Asians to Europe, America or Canada.

Reading his novels lands us in the dilemma whether his stories are completely fictional or real life narratives of the Indian community in Africa. But, his memoir, "And Home Was Kariakoo: A memoir of Indian African" reveals that many of his characters in his novels or stories are in-fact a replica of palpable lives of Asian expatriates.

### **1.1.Purpose of the study**

"And Home Was Kariakoo" is not only a travel memoir but also contains the history of Indian hegira to Zanzibar (Jangbar in those days) and then to Tanzania, Kenya, Mozambique and other East African nations. Any literature as said by Chinua Achebe, "whether it is handed over by oral or print gives us second handle of reality" (Chinua Achebe (2012) selected Essays; Anchor). It was absolutely authentic as VasANJI provides a dossier about the links between Indians and Africans for the last six to seven centuries. The role of the Indian diaspora before and after the independence of Africa is well delineated. The places mentioned in the memoir exhibit a great historical connection with the Indian community. The memoir also provides information about Indian merchants guiding the Portuguese traveller Vasco Da Gama to reach India from the middle of the Hindu ocean as it happened between the Zanzibar islands and Mombasa port. VasANJI's memoir also brought out the loss of the lives of Indian soldiers at the place called Tanga - one of the port cities in Tanzania, where around 800 Indian soldiers were killed by the German army (many of the killed were South Indians) during the first world war on behalf of the British side. That was a haunting memory for the survivors of that war. A lot of such happenings are brought out in this book.

Hence, this research is focused on finding out the forgotten or unnoticed facts about Indian emigrants in East Africa, especially in Tanzania. Several characters in VasANJI's novels have been portrayed in their bygone times in Africa. This research on "And Home Was Kariakoo" endorses the above statement.

## **2. METHODOLOGY**

To consummate the research for the above-given purpose, apart from "And Home Was Kariakoo", some of the other works of M.G.VasANJI, a few books, journals and research papers of other authors have been read. The main researcher has had the opportunity to consult some of the Indian outlanders who settled in Tanzania as the researcher is also living there. The researcher visited some of the places mentioned in the book and spoke to the Indian community who have been living there for decades to testify the writings of the VasANJI are truthful. The textual Analysis method is vastly used and the biographical method is also used to some extent for the research.

## **3. MAJOR FINDING**

VasANJI engrosses palpability towards his homeland East Africa as he was born in Kenya and was raised in Tanzania. Later, he settled in Canada but wanted to visit Tanzania where he had many memories. The diasporic sense of longing for the motherland is visible in his idea of visiting Tanzania. Once he decided to visit Tanzania, he took a flight to Dar but, ambiguity

reigns in his mind as he began to ruminate upon many things comparing life in the West and Africa. Being the son of Indian African migrants, he becomes apprehensive about his reception by the African land (which indeed is his motherland); he wonders, whether Africa will receive him as his son or will show any discrimination for his having Asian roots. Kenyan greatest author Ngugi Wa Thiong'o rightly said that "life, struggle even amidst pain and blood and poverty, seemed beautiful" (Ngugi Wa Thiong'o (2012). "A Grain of Wheat", p.157, Penguin). That accurately suits Vasanji, as he lands and starts his journey from Dar Es Salaam - the biggest city in Tanzania. He rejoiced and visited most of the prominent places of Tanzania and described their importance, beauty, history and also their connection with Indian immigrants. In this process of narrating the history of alienated Asians in Tanzania, Vasanji became representative of them as per the statement of Madhukrishnan.

In the context of contemporary African literature the challenge, then, becomes that of resisting the urge to turn re-presentation into a straightforward representation..... (Page 20 – Madhu Krishnan - Contemporary African Literature in English: Global locations, Postcolonial Identifications).

In the chapter, "Gaam, Dar Es Salaam: The Indian Town", Vasanji provides a brief history of Indian migrants that includes his own too. He describes how the forefathers of Indian migrants who came from Indian Gujarathi towns like Jamnagar, Junagad and Porebandar, settled down as small merchants in East Africa. Though Indians had started coming to Africa centuries ago, most of them in recent history reached Dar Essalaam in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. They established the commercial section in the old town of Dar. That Indian settlement was called Gaam or "Town" or mjiniin Swahili. Vasanji explained how the business of Indians increased over decades. By the 1920s their small shops turned into single-storied buildings and 1950s they turned into four-storied or five-storied tall buildings. One of the greatest African female authors Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie judiciously stated that "when you travel to search and you come back home to find yourself there" ("I Left Home to Find Home". Interview with Carl Wilkinson, [www.theguardian.com](http://www.theguardian.com). March 06, 2005). It properly fits the author as he visited those places and found that some of those buildings are still in existence. Among those rich Indians in those days, the best was Habib Punja, the wealthy man at that time. But he died of a heart attack when his properties were nationalized in the year of 1971. Vasanji portrayed two similar characters in his novel "Book of Secrets" where two businessmen called Hassam Punja and Nur Mohamed Pipa died because the government nationalized their properties.

Pipa, a cynical old man, after the death of his son Amin and hearing that much of Amin Mansion was the people's property now, said, "Bas, only this? Let him take away me too now" The next day he died. (Page 311 of 449 Kindle -The book of secrets)

Similar things happened to many Indian settlers when most of their properties were nationalized by the Tanzanian government as Vasanji writes:

One day in 1971, the government announced the confiscation of all rental property, in keeping with the recent socialist doctrine proclaimed as the Arusha Declaration. This meant that for the Asians, who had arrived penniless in Africa, two generations or more of family savings

invested in property disappeared at stroke. (Location 179 of 5123 Kindle- And home was Kariakoo)

In another chapter "Tanga –Decline in Sun", Vasaji described a pathetic incident that happened to the Indian soldiers. Hundreds of Indian soldiers, who participated on the side of the British government in the First World War, were brutally killed and their diseased bodies were buried on the roadsides anonymously. The description of that incident was painful and it makes the readers shed tears for the poor souls of their brethren. Researchers observed that the incidents happened at a place called Tanga and the war was called as Battle of Tanga or Battle of Bees. On October 17, 1914, around 8000 Indian soldiers reached Tanga port to fight against the German army. The battle was the biggest failure for the British. It lost, wounded or missed nearly 817 Indian soldiers among whom many belong to South India. Their names were unknown and their bodies were buried like dead destitutes on the African soil. Once the war was over, the local people collected chapattis from the bodies of dead Indian soldiers. For whom they died and what they got for their lost lives? The answer is silence as the research found that the sacrifice of those Indian soldiers was little noticed by the world as Vasani points out with a wrenching heart:

As the British- mainly Indians – approached the town, through dense rubber and sisal plantations under the burning November Sun, the Germans –mainly the Askaris- fired. The Indians bolted in numbers. As the official history relates one instance, "The Madrasi troops, like the rest, were, suffering much from the tropical heat and consequent thirst. (Location 666 of 5123 Kindle - And Home Was Kariakoo)

In another chapter, "India and Africa: Of Entrepreneurs Old and New", Vasani provided information about trade relations between India and East Africa vividly. As per the records mentioned by Vasani, Portuguese travellers met many Indian merchants in the East African ports such as Kilwa, (Tanzania) and Malindi, Mombasa (Kenya) in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Goods such as Cotton, Silk and Medicines were shipped from great *Combay* port (Present day Kambhat from Gujarat) to East Africa and in exchange they took Gold, Ivory and wax. A Portuguese captain Duarte Barbosa in his description mentioned Indian merchants as:

These ships of Combay are so many and so large, and with so much merchandise, that it is terrible to think of so great an expenditure of cotton stuff as they bring" (Location 822 of 5123 Kindle).

This statement was absolute evidence of Indian trade relations with East Africa in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The researcher observed that a couple of hundreds of Indian migrants settled in *Tanga* and most of them belong to either *Koja*, *Khano* or *Bhatia* communities in Gujarat, India. Still, many of them stayed back in *Tanga* even after the independence of Tanzania. Some of the notable and highly successful businessmen and philanthropists were Jairam Sevji, Ladha Damji and Tharia Topan. These kinds of people ruled the business world in East Africa before and after the independence of African nations. They even donated hospitals, schools and libraries to the countries they lived in. Some of them served as tax collection officers during Oman Sultanate in East Africa too. Those were the heydays for Indian migrants and the rise of African soil. Another notable Indian businessman, namely, A.M.Jeevanji, during

the colonial period, even supplied workers for the Ugandan railway from India. He also founded the Standard in Mombasa and still it is in existence.

The research came across another untold story about some Indian merchants who even participated in the famous *Maji Maji* war<sup>1</sup> along with Africans against the German rulers. But they were caught by Germans and were tortured. These incidents were described by a famous Tanzanian poet, Mzee bin kidigo bin il-Quadri in his poem “Poem on Makunganya”. Four Indian merchants were given death sentence orders but later were sent to imprisonment:

Wahindi wakati wanyororoni, waka weakka rakoni,  
Sitimawakangojia, ilipokujawakapakiwa,  
Wotekujisufiria, Wakafia bender Esselama” (The Indians were chained and put into prison, waiting for the steamer) (location 1238 of 5123 Kindle -And Home Was Kariakoo)

The research spotted that Vasanji not only described the virtues of the Indian diaspora but also dug their vices related to the slave trade in Tanzania. He pointed out that some Indian merchants collaborated with Arabs and tribal leaders in Tanzania to run the slave trade. This was one of the major reasons for local Africans to hate Indians and the resultant atrocities such as occupying businesses, rapes on women and forced marriages over the Indian diaspora after the independence. Slave business done by Indian merchants was mentioned in the letter by a member of the British special commission Captain Frederic Elten stating, “I received orders to proceed to Kilwa to carry out the policy with regards to Indians holding slaves.....”(Location 1082 of 5123 Kindle)

### **3.1.The link between Vasco Da Gama and Indian merchants at Kilwa**

Research noticed evidence of the role of a few Indian merchants who helped the Portuguese traveller Vasco Da Gama to find the sea route to India. The research discovered that it happened between the port towns of *Kilwa* in Tanzania and Mozambique. While the Portuguese were on the way searching the sea route to India, they observed a Moor (A person who was not Arab, who didn't drink wine and who was from the great Indian port city *Combay* (Present Kambat-Gujart). Vasco Da Gama's men captured him and with his help, they knew the sea route to India:

That he was described as Dalal, a broker, only makes one smile. He agreed to assist them, likely under duress-he was captured only because, unlike the others who were with him, he could not swim. His name was Dawane. (Location 1343 of 5123 Kindle - And Home Was Kariakoo).

### **3.2.Zanzibar – a beautiful island to live on but was a nightmare for migrants**

The researcher witnessed that Vasanji's book “And Home Was Kariakoo” narrated the importance of Zanzibar island in the lives of Indian migrants for the last few centuries. Indeed,

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<sup>1</sup>It was war (1905-1907) against German rulers in Tanzania by local forces. Locals believed in the war that if they drink some meditated water (*Maji* in Kiswahili), German bullets won't harm them.



**The Untold Stories behind Tearful Eyes in M.G. Vasanji's "And Home Was Kariakoo: A Memoir of an Indian African"**

Zanzibar was the main entrance for Indians to reach Africa. They used to come from Gujarat ports to Jangbar (old name for Zanzibar) by using dhows or small boats as penniless. Once they reached there, they engaged in small business then they rose into higher positions in Oman Sultanate as Zanzibar became the capital in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The lives of Arabs, Asians and other migrants were peaceful until January 1964, when a revolution took place by African freedom fighters. From that moment, the lives of all migrants were scattered, and it was described by Vasanji in the chapter named "Zanzibar revolution". It happened because of racial discrimination as adroitly observed by Arup Chandra das and Dr. Smrithi Singh.

The relationship between the East Africans and the natives is so awful and outrageous that no inter-communication is possible because of the natives' manner of treating the Asians as the colonisers themselves. (Anup Chandra Das and Smriti Singh. "Discrimination and Difference, Racial and Colonial: An Overview of M.G Vassanji's The Gunny Sack and No New Land" ISSN 0976-8165)

Arab community was the most affected and Asians were too suffered a lot because of this revolution. It is shocking to know that between 5000 to 20000 Arab and other Asian men were killed, women were raped, shops were looted, young girls were forcefully got married by local African people and whatnot? Atrocities against Arabs were well known to the world but those that happened to Asians were under-reported as explained by Vasanji. The family of Vasanji was also under threat during that time as noticed by the researcher. The same was reported by the Time as follows:

Carloads of whooping blacks careered through the Arab and Indian quarters, looting and shooting. Radios blared ominous death messages of doom and death. (Location 3602 of 5123 Kindle - And Home Was Kariakoo)

Our home had four girls and my mother. Our own Khoja community of Zanzibar, we heard, had gathered frightened in the Khano, seeking safety in numbers and the sanctuary of the prayer house. They seem to have suffered minimally in physical terms, though according to some people today the violence against Asians was underreported. (Location 3602 of 5123 Kindle -And Home Was Kariakoo)

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

The analysis of the memoir "And Home Was Kariakoo; A Memoir of an Indian African" marked that the life of the Indian diaspora in Tanzania was well described. It is discovered that the history the writer mentioned, the places he described in connection with Indians or the incidents he presented as examples of humiliation, alienation, suffering, exile, pains and gains which Indians received are absolutely accurate. The researcher noticed that the information about Indian migrants presented in this book is little known to the rest of the world. The untold stories of Indian Africans that are revealed in the memoir can be used as reference for further study over Indian African diaspora.

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### **AUTHORS' NOTE**

*This is to clarify and assure that we both the authors do not have any conflict of interest to confess. This research is done to bring out the realities about the Indian diaspora in East Africa during pre and post-colonization and after the Independence of African nations. We have done this research on mutual collaboration and Professor Jyothirmai played a key role by guiding me in a proper direction.*

*Any query related to this article can be communicated to Mr.Veerababu Maridi, lecturer at St. Joseph College of Health and Allied Sciences, Dar Es Salaam, St. Joseph University in Tanzania. Email: [veerumaridi@gmail.com](mailto:veerumaridi@gmail.com)*