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Article

Selves Fall Apart: Existential Meditations in Cheikh Hamidou Kane's *Ambiguous Adventure* and M.G. Vassanji's *No New Land*

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Abstract: This article engages in a comparative examination of Cheikh Hamidou Kane's novel *Ambiguous Adventure* (1961) and M.G. Vassanji's novel *No New Land* (1991), which each richly delineates the journey of a conflicted protagonist whose conception of selfhood is decimated as a result of his dispersal from Africa to the West. As I demonstrate, the two texts ultimately reveal themselves to be acute existential meditations that suggest that "selves" can in fact fall apart due to the inherent trauma of diasporic dispersal.

Keywords: Africa; Cheikh Hamidou Kane; M.G. Vassanji; Ambiguous Adventure; No New Land; Existentialism

Introduction

For migrants, the process of diasporic dispersal is often indelibly associated with a condition of existential uncertainty. Those who experience the process of radical geographic and sociocultural displacement are frequently placed in strained subject positions that require a fundamental questioning and renegotiation of their conceptions of selfhood. In this respect, Cheikh Hamidou Kane's *Ambiguous Adventure* (1961) and M.G. Vassanji's *No New Land* (1991) constitute fertile novelistic explorations of these very issues.

Though on the surface the two novels, published roughly thirty years apart, might initially seem to have little in common, a thorough close reading and comparative analysis of both texts reveals how they each richly delineate the journey of a conflicted protagonist whose conception of selfhood is decimated as a result of his dispersal from Africa to the West. Read in tandem with one another, the two texts ultimately reveal themselves to be acute existential meditations that suggest that "selves" can in fact fall apart due to the inherent trauma of diasporic dispersal.[1]

Ambiguous Adventure

Embracing the format of the *Bildungsroman* or novel of education, Cheikh Hamidou Kane's *Ambiguous Adventure* focuses on the educational journey and spiritual transformation of Samba Diallo, who is born into the aristocratic ranks of the Diallobé tribe in Senegal during the waning years of the French colonial era. Although during his early boyhood Samba receives a traditional Islamic education, his faith-based studies are interrupted by his family's decision to secure him a Western education so that he can be prepared to serve as a future leader of the

Diallobé. A gifted individual possessed of a Herculean intellect, Samba proves as skilled a student of Western philosophy as of Islam, yet his exposure to the secular ideals of Western culture erode his ability to embrace the religious conviction of his youth, thereby throwing him into the depths of a profound existential crisis that assumes both spiritual and cultural hues.

We are first introduced to Samba during the early stages of his youth when he is immersed in the study of Islam under the guidance of the elderly Thierno, who is the revered master of the Diallobé tribe's local Koranic school. A strict disciplinarian, Thierno at first registers as a cruel figure given the extreme corporeal punishment that he doles out to the young Samba when he even slightly wavers from precise recitation of Koranic verses: "That day, Thierno had beaten him again. And yet Samba Diallo knew his sacred verse. It was only that he had made a slip of the tongue" (3). While one may not condone Thierno's pedagogical tactics, there is a discernible method to them. Specifically, Thierno wants Samba to embrace the idea that the materialist distractions of his earthly existence pale in comparison to the glory of God and the spiritual realm. By promoting this strict Islamic dogma, Thierno hopes to mould Samba into a future spiritual leader who can protect the Diallobé from the encroaching forces of secular modernity associated with the French colonial presence. As critic Samba Gadjigo notes in his article "Literature and History: The Case of Cheikh Hamidou Kane's *Ambiguous Adventure*" (1991), "In his desire to shape Samba Diallo into a man entirely focused on God, Thierno seeks to keep alive the ideals of the past and to ensure their continuity" (31).

Discernibly reverent of Samba, whom he considers "a gift from God" (5), Thierno nonetheless faces opposition from the child's domineering aunt, "The Most Royal Lady," who objects to his pedagogical methods and the seemingly life-denying religious views that he is imparting upon her nephew: “The teacher is trying to kill the life in you” (22). As the older sister of the Diallobé chief, the Most Royal Lady feels it is the duty of the Diallobé aristocracy to enrol the young Samba in the local French school, where he is to receive an educational foundation that will prepare him for future studies at the university-level in France. In contrast to the tradition-minded Thierno, the Most Royal Lady hopes that Samba will become a future emissary of “progress” to the Diallobé people, who are already beginning to send their children to the local French school. As this powerful woman sees it, the French have been able to achieve conquest through the power of their knowledge, and thus she wants her nephew to embark on the path of technocratic progress by learning what she terms “the art of conquering without being in the right”: “The foreign school is the new form of war which those who have come here are waging, and we must send our elite there, expecting that all the country will follow them” (37).

Through the opposing views of Thierno and the Most Royal Lady, we can discern a conflict between two competing ideologies. In essence, Thierno advocates a complete rejection of modernity and its secular values, whereas the Most Royal Lady rejects Diallobé tradition in favour of Western-centered education. Compellingly, Kane dramatizes this conflict in almost dialectical fashion, thereby drawing attention to the inherent shortcomings of both positions. While Thierno, for example, is sincere in his views, his desire for a spiritual retreat from modernity seems symptomatic of his unwillingness to acknowledge the reality of the modernizing colonial presence. As critic John D. Erickson observes in his article “Cheikh Hamidou Kane’s *L’Aventure Ambiguë*” (1976), “All of Thierno’s instincts repel him from an encounter with Western society” (92). Yet if Thierno’s views are problematic, the Most Royal Lady’s are even more so, for while she claims to “detest” the French schools (45), she nonetheless urges the Diallobé to send their children to them so that they can acquire the knowledge of the ostensible conqueror. In advocating such a position, however, she falls victim to the very trap laid by European imperialism, which historically conquered as much by physical force as it did by means of *intellectual colonization*.

In this contest of ideologies, the Most Royal Lady has her way, and the young Samba is – to his initial chagrin – sent to the local French school in the town referred to as L., where the focus of his intellect is gradually shifted from faith towards reason. Indeed, Samba quickly transitions from studying the Koran to contemplating the mathematician and philosopher Blaise Pascal's (1623-1662) *Les Pensées* (1670), a process that foreshadows his progressive drift towards Westernized thought. Unfinished during Pascal's lifetime and published posthumously during the late seventeenth century, *Les Pensées* is today best known for "Pascal's Wager." This philosophical argument holds that while the existence of God cannot be proven, one should nonetheless act as though God exists because in doing so one gains everything whereas by not believing one has everything to lose. Although Pascal intended *Les Pensées* as an *apologia* for Christianity, the seeds of existential doubt and a distinctly Western analytical perspective are seemingly inbuilt to this argument, which seeks to justify faith through reason by means of a rather crass wager based on a vulgarized notion of utilitarian pragmatism. This is surely what Samba's father, the Knight, has in mind of Pascal when he warns his son to beware of him, noting, "*Les Pensées* … Hmm … Pascal. Of the men of the West, he is certainly the most reassuring. But be distrustful even of him. He had doubted… The men of the West know less and less of the miracle and the act of grace" (96).

If there is a figure in *Ambiguous Adventure* who constitutes a third space apart from Thierno's retreat from Western secular values and the Most Royal Lady's argument for immersion within them, it is Samba's father. Occupying a minor position in the French colonial government, the Knight is educated in the philosophy and history of the West, yet remains true to the religion and traditional garb of the Diallobé. In this regard, he is what the postcolonial critic Homi K. Bhabha, some three decades after the publication of Kane's novel, would define as a *hybrid subject*. Embracing neither the perspective of the aggressive colonizer nor the supposedly "hapless" colonized, the Knight emerges as "neither the One … nor the Other … but something else besides, which contests the terms and territories of both" (41).

Specifically, the Knight feels that the future of the Diallobé people resides in intercultural communication with the West. As he tells Samba, "We who believe – we cannot abandon our brothers who do not believe. The world belongs to them as much as it does to us" (105). As his earlier conversation with Paul Lacroix, the French administrator of L., has made clear, the Knight believes that Samba will emerge a future leader of the Diallobé. Specifically, the Knight envisions Samba fusing his indigenous values with his Western education in a manner that will allow him to engage the West in a mutually beneficial dialogue of intercultural exchange:

> The era of separate destinies has run its course. In that sense, the end of the world has indeed come for every one of us, because no one can any longer live by the simple carrying out what he himself is. But from our long and varied ripenings, a son will be born to the world: the first son of the earth, the only one, also… M. Lacroix, this future – I accept it. My son is the pledge of that. He will contribute to its building. It is my wish

> that he contribute not, as a stranger come from distant regions, but as an artisan responsible for the destinies of the citadel. (79-80)

In essence, the Knight hopes that Samba will help realize a future in which the West's sterile, technocratized ethos will be tempered by the spiritual values of the subaltern world, thereby bringing about what Erickson aptly describes as "the reconciliation of West and non-West through the reconciliation of Man and God, Light and Shadow, Life and Death" (95).

Unfortunately, however, the Knight's ambitions for his son are undermined from the very moment that Samba is enrolled at the local French school. As events have it, Samba's Islamic education is interrupted at a crucial stage in his spiritual formation, for he is removed from the Koranic school almost immediately following his memorized oral recital of the Koran. As critic Marc Caplan observes in his article "Nos Ancestres, Les Diallobés: Cheikh Hamidou Kane's *Ambiguous Adventure* and the Paradoxes of Islamic Negritude" (2005), this recital constitutes Samba's "initiation into manhood and [a] more intellectually engaged study of the Koran" (938) and can thus be seen as "the Islamic equivalent of the bar mitzvah" (938). By removing Samba from the Glowing Hearth *before* he can progress to a more "intellectually engaged" study of Islam (935), his family plants the seeds for his future spiritual decay, as his religious education is interrupted before the necessary level of spiritual fortification can be instilled within him.

Given that much of the West's knowledge of Greek antiquity emanates from its Renaissance-era dialogue with Islamic culture, it seems evident enough that Thierno was educating the young Samba along a classical *trivium*-like pedagogical system.[2] This system would, of course, begin with the *grammar stage* of rote memorization of the Koran, and then progress to a *logic stage* understanding of its literary mechanisms, before concluding with *rhetoric stage* training that would prepare Samba to expound upon and defend his faith. Yet in only completing the *grammar stage* of his Islamic education, Samba is deprived of the formal defensive mechanisms necessary to protect his faith from the rationalist critiques it is subjected to in his encounter with Western ideology, which culminates with his journey to attend university in post-World War II Paris.

Although Samba's experiences in France constitute only a small part of the novel, the atheistic currents of post-World War II Parisian society are evocatively delineated by Kane, who seems to have shaped this latter section of his narrative in accordance with the then-fashionable ethos of the existential novel. In depicting Samba's relationship with his university classmate Lucienne, for example, Kane establishes a philosophical dichotomy between Samba's Islamic faith and Lucienne's championing of the secular religiosity of Marxism. The fact that Lucienne is the daughter of a kindly Protestant pastor serves only to further underscore the era's burgeoning secularity, for despite having been raised in a religious household, Lucienne does not regard religion to be a viable means of addressing the subaltern's plight. As she tells Samba, "Your [religious] cause is defensible, perhaps: the sad thing is that those who defend it do not always have your purity and Papa's. They ally themselves with this cause to cover up designs that would move backwards" (117).

While this essential equation of spiritual faith with teleological regression saddens Samba, he nonetheless finds himself susceptible to this secular rationalization, which kills not his desire but rather his ability to believe in the religious ideals of his past. As Samba explains to Adèle, a young French-born woman of African descent with whom he enjoys a brief flirtation, French society has deadened the sense of spiritual integration with the world that he had previously known while living amongst the Diallobé: “But they – they interposed themselves, and undertook to transform me in their image. Progressively, they brought me out from the heart of things, and accustomed me to live at a distance from the world” (160). In delineating this dilemma, Samba echoes the observations of the French social theorist Emile Durkheim, to whom Kane – himself a graduate of philosophy at the University of Paris – is perhaps alluding.

Generally regarded as the founding father of sociology, Durkheim is best known for his book *The Division of Labour in Society* (1893). Here Durkheim argues that traditional societies are united by a strong *collective conscience* that stands in opposition to the ethos of modern industrial societies, which are characterized by social fragmentation and a tendency towards individuation (summarized in Stokes 191). According to Durkheim, the potential danger of such radically individualistic societies is a concomitant condition known as *anomie*, which occurs when individuals experience a lack of social integration and a general sense of moral listlessness due to the absence of any guiding socioreligious parameters (see Macionis and Gerber 104-105).

A sort of philosophical precursor to the philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre’s conception of angst,[3] *anomie* serves as a useful concept to delineate the existential quagmire that Samba faces as a result of journeying from the *collective conscience* of Diallobé society to the anomic realm of post-WWII Paris, where he feels perpetually alienated and estranged: “Samba Diallo was walking down the boulevard of Saint Michel… ‘These streets are bare,’ he was noticing. ‘No they are not empty. One meets objects of flesh in them, as well as objects of metal. Apart from that, they are empty’” (128). Kane has, of course, previously alluded to this anomic condition via the character referred to as “the fool,” who is an eccentric amongst the Diallobé.

Having travelled to the West and perhaps fought in the Second World War, the fool has returned to his community in a psychologically scarred state due to his personally unassimilable encounters with Western secular modernity. As he cryptically remarks to Thierno of his Western experiences, “In man’s own dwelling places I have seen … deadly spaces. Mechanisms are reigning there” (92).

While contemporary theorists such as Bhabha evince positive conceptions of hybridity, the fool seems unable to process his intercultural journeying in a manner that results in a positive hybridized outcome. This is evidenced by his aberrant fusion of “immaculate” African garb and dirty Western apparel (86), which Samba interprets as being symptomatic of his traumatized, apparently schizophrenic demeanour:

> The man who thus arrived was belted into an old frock coat, under which the least move he made revealed that he was wearing the ample garments of the Diallobé. The age of the frock coat, and its *doubtful cleanliness* over the immaculate neatness of the boubous, bestowed an *unusual* appearance upon his persona [emphasis added]. (85-86)

Though contemporary postmodern depictions of “hybridized” fusions of dress lean towards the positive, Kane’s emphasis on the fool’s discernibly disharmonious fusion of African and Western garb suggests that this character’s originary conception of Diallobé selfhood is buried beneath the burdensome remnants of his contact with a contaminating West.

The fool’s remedy to this traumatizing experience has been to align himself with Thierno, whom he valourizes in a devout, almost fanatical fashion as the only barrier protecting the Diallobé from Western technocracy: “Master, I should like to pray with you to repel the upheaval. There is obscene chaos in the world once more, and it defies us" (93). Yet while the fool worships the aging Thierno as a barrier against this change, the seeds of social alteration are unavoidably planted within Diallobé society by means of Thierno's decision to appoint Demba, Samba's boyhood colleague from the Koranic school, as the new Koranic teacher who will succeed him. Despite having been raised amongst the strict Islamic values of the Diallobé, the lower-class Demba resents the abject poverty of most of his compatriots. Accordingly, he decides that the children of the common people should be afforded the opportunity to attend the local French school, thereby effectively putting an end to the Diallobé's traditional religious foundation.

Upon hearing of Thierno's decision to appoint Demba in a letter from his cousin, the Chief, Samba's initial reaction is to disavow his connection to his homeland and its concerns in a manner that reflects his drift towards an increasingly individuated worldview: "What have their problems to do with me? … After all, I am only myself. I have only me" (126). Sometime later, Samba receives a letter summoning him home from his father, whose comments suggest he has intuitively predicted the existential malaise from which his son is now suffering: "You are afraid that God has abandoned you, because you no longer have the full sense of Him that you had in the past… So you are not far from considering Him as having betrayed you" (163). Intriguingly, the Knight's comments also echo his *earlier* implicit warning to Samba that what began with his exposure to Pascal's *Les Pensées* would, in the trajectory of Western philosophical history, result in his arrival at Nietzsche's famous proclamation of the death of God: "They began, timidly, by relegating God to a place between inverted commas. Then two centuries later, having acquired more assurance, they decreed 'God is dead'" (100). As his letter makes clear, the Knight vociferously disagrees with this Nietzschean view, for he suggests that it is not God who has abandoned Samba, but rather Samba who has absented himself from God: "[Y]ou are not far from considering Him as having betrayed you. But you have not stopped to think that the traitor might be yourself" (163).

By the time he arrives home, Thierno has since died and Samba finds himself confronted by the fool, who greets him as the rightful successor to Thierno's position: "Teacher of the Diallobé, you have come back? That is good" (169). Although he knows the fool to be a psychologically traumatized figure, Samba now recognizes that there is some apparent method to this man's madness, for he is struck by the piercing acuity of the fool's characterization of the West's cold, spiritually void lifestyle: "They have been eaten up by objects. In order that they may move, their bodies are shod with large rapid objects. To nourish themselves, they put iron objects between their hands and their mouths" (170). Similar to the fool, Samba also feels psychologically traumatized by his Western sojourn. Yet while the fool has been able to experience a sort of reintegration amongst the Diallobé, Samba's intercultural journeying has so radically ruptured his former conception of selfhood that he has essentially become appropriated and colonized by the modern West. In essence, Samba *desires* to return to the spiritual integration he had felt amongst the Diallobé during his youth, yet is prevented from doing so as a result of his prolonged exposure to Western ideals, which he feels have killed his spiritual resolve.

Pressured by the fool to pray at the grave of Thierno, Samba finds himself too psychologically and spiritually discombobulated to comply with his wishes. The fool, however, is so radically unnerved by Samba's refusal to pray that he ends up killing him with an unspecified object: "[T]he fool drew his weapon, and suddenly everything went black around Samba Diallo" (174). In the novel's ensuing pages, we are made privy to the thoughts that run through Samba's stream of consciousness as he lays dying, and the text concludes with the following ambiguous lines, which give the *initial* impression that death reunites Samba with Allah:

> Hail to you, rediscovered wisdom, my victory! The limpidness of your wave is awaiting my gaze. I fix my eyes upon you, and you harden into Being. I am without limit. Sea, the limpidity of your wave is awaiting my gaze. I fix my eyes upon you, and you glitter, without limit. I wish for you, through all eternity. (178)

Yet while the critic M.A. Orthofer divines from these concluding lines that Kane "clearly sides with tradition" and has crafted an ending in which "God offers all the easy answers" (Orthofer), I disagree with his view that Kane is somehow advocating Islamic fundamentalism.

Certainly, a more nuanced consideration of the text and its conclusion suggests that Kane is positioning religion in a far more ambiguous category than Orthofer suggests. Curiously enough, Samba's death seems tenuously related to the Sartrean notion of *bad faith*. One senses that Samba desires – but lacks the resolve – to kill himself, and thus rejoices when the fool takes his life instead, as this provides him with an escape from the burdens of his Western-permeated consciousness and allows him to spend his fleeting moments *dreaming* of a reunion with Allah.[4] Through both the fool's decision to kill Samba for his refusal to pray and Samba's surreal reconnection with his faith in the fleeting moments of consciousness that precede his death, Kane compels readers to question the inherently subjective manner in which individuals interpret notions of "God's will." By means of Samba's diasporic existential malaise and his apparent embracement of death as an escape from religious doubt, Kane was perhaps suggesting to his post-World War II readership that while alienation was *studied* at the Sorbonne, it was being *lived* in Paris's streets by recent African émigrés, who were experiencing their own alienating experiences firsthand.

No New Land

While Kane delineates the existential discombobulation associated with Samba's journey from Senegal to Paris and back again, M.G. Vassanji's *No New Land*, written and set in Toronto at the start of the 1990s, explores Nurdin Lalani's existential crisis of cultural dislocation. A South Asian from Dar, Tanganyika (now Tanzania), who was raised in a strict Islamic family, Nurdin immigrates to the Toronto suburb of Don Mills with his wife, Zera, and children, Fatima and Hanif, where they find themselves residing in an apartment building with other immigrants from the Afro-Indian diaspora. Yet while Nurdin initially dreams of a new, richer life in Canada, his dreams are cut short by the economic realities of his monotonous working-class existence. Ironically enough, for Nurdin, life in Canada is indeed *no new land*, as the drudgerous travails of daily socioeconomic survival follow him from Dar to Toronto, where he ends up trading the religious regimentation of his former existence for the socioeconomic regimentation of his new life.

From the time of his birth, Nurdin, it seems, was one of those unfortunate individuals destined to resignedly struggle throughout life in a state that Thoreau famously characterized as "quiet desperation" (9). Having spent his formative years subjected to the religiosity of his domineering father, Haji Lalani, the meek yet affable Nurdin seems to have endured an anxious childhood, which served as an informal preparation for the relative ignominy that comes to define his adult existence:

> Of his son Nurdin … Haji Lalani did not think much. If anything at all, he thought him a good-for-nothing, a bumbler, one likely to drop a cup of tea when serving a guest. But in school and among friends, Nurdin Lalani was a middling kind of boy. Neither short nor tall, somewhat skinny, he was not one to take risks… He was prone to be the butt of jokes of the rowdier boys, the gang leaders, but these, as he grew older, he learned to manipulate, simply by sharing prudently his generous allowance. (19-20)

While during his early adulthood Nurdin enjoys the brief freedom of the open road in Tanganyika as a travelling salesman for the Bata Shoe Company, political upheavals make life increasingly difficult for Dar's South Asian inhabitants, who are essentially made unwelcome in the wake of independence and nationalization.

Accordingly, Nurdin finds himself immigrating to Canada along with his wife and children in the early 1980s, thereby continuing the nomadic journeying first begun by his father a generation before via his emigration from India to Africa. While Nurdin at first dreams of finding success in Toronto, the economic realities of his new life quickly set in, and he finds himself working a series of dead-end jobs until he eventually secures a measure of base economic comfort working as a janitor at the Ontario Addiction Centre: "Notch by notch 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). In recounting Nurdin's Toronto existence over the course of several years, Vassanji conveys how Nurdin becomes afflicted by thoughts of existential rot soon after his arrival in the city, for he becomes prone to contemplating his dull existence from his living room while gazing out at the CN Tower: "'When does a man begin to rot?' Gazing at the distant CN Tower blinking its signals into the hazy darkness, Nurdin asked himself the question… The lofty structure he had grown familiar with over the months" (82).

Serving as a symbol of both the promise and the anomie-inducing despair associated with secular modernity, the CN Tower dangles the allure of material success before Nurdin whilst simultaneously withholding it from him. Slyly, Vassanji effectively underscores Nurdin's absurd existence via a discussion that occurs between Nanji and Jamal, two other Dar immigrants who live in the same building as the Lalani family and associate with them. A brooding intellectual and part-time linguistics professor at the University of Toronto's Woodsworth College, Nanji is obsessed with the European existentialists, whose theories he explains to the pragmatically-oriented lawyer Jamal as follows:

> Most people go on mindlessly … they don't *choose* to live. That's because they do what they are told or made to do… And think of this: when death comes unasked, when it takes you by surprise, it will rob you even of free choice, because when you thought you were choosing to live, *it* was only letting you live. (76)

Spending his life toiling away in dull labour to support himself and his family, Nurdin simultaneously lives in fear of Allah's wrath, which he associates with a picture of his late father that adorns a wall in the family apartment: "The fez on the small head, the bushy eyebrows, the hard eyes, the small mouth: relentless in judgment here as the real person had been in Africa" (83).

In many respects, this picture serves as a spiritual counterweight to the anomic allure of the CN Tower, for Nurdin finds himself increasingly torn between his Islamic faith and his burgeoning sensual desires. Vassanji humorously alludes to this conflict by means of an incident in which Nurdin accepts some pork offered to him by his coworker Romesh. Although forbidden to consume pork as a practicing Muslim, Nurdin nonetheless enjoys its taste and finds himself growing concerned that his consumption of this victual has spiritually unmoored him by changing something "inside" him (128). Although Nanji assures Nurdin that the consumption of pork cannot biochemically affect one's morality, Vassanji suggests that Nurdin's violation of this devout Muslim taboo has, in a sense, changed him, for in consuming this victual, Nurdin moves closer to a secularized conception of moral self-autonomy and individuation: "It is you who have changed when you first attempt, or even think about, eating pork for the first time. And once you've had it, the first time … you cannot cheat yourself, you are no longer the same man: something has turned inside you, with a definite click" (129).

Certainly, pork is not the only thing that Nurdin comes to desire within Toronto, for the city's generally liberal, permissive culture gradually fuels his mind with sexual thoughts: "Like a boy at puberty he had become aware of Woman… Bra-less women with lively breasts under blouses and T-shirts that simply sucked your eyeballs out. Buttocks breaking out of shorts" (141). The intensity of these newfound carnal desires are only further exacerbated by the fact that his religious-minded wife, Zera, has little interest in sex:

> Zera was married to God, the idea of God. Not that she was otherworldly or excessively devotional. Her obsession was to discuss God and religion, and she liked nothing better

> than to sit at the feet of her teacher, Missionary, and to hear him discourse on God, the Prophet, the sages… They had not been physically really close for years. (138-139)

Yet although he may be tempted by Toronto's *laissez-faire* social attitudes, Nurdin – after visiting a Yonge Street peepshow with Romesh – still attempts to exorcize any supposedly "impure" thoughts from his mind by gazing at his late father's picture, which rekindles the vestiges of his religious upbringing: "To punish himself, he looked full square at Haji Lalani's photograph, eye to eye… When he died, his father would be waiting for him with the whip, God's personal executioner" (146).

Feeling entrapped in an increasingly arduous, joyless existence, Nurdin is offered the possibility of a respite in the form of a romantic relationship with Sushila, a woman whom he grew up with in Dar and subsequently reconnects with while working at the Ontario Addiction Centre. While Nurdin's friendship with Sushila begins innocently enough with occasional cups of tea at her Kensington Market apartment, his connection with her gradually progresses to the point where he is presented with the possibility of embarking on an extramarital affair. For Nurdin, this opportunity confronts him with the first genuinely agonizing moral decision he has ever faced in his life. As he sits in his apartment ruminating upon the moral dilemma he faces, he finds himself torn between the picture of his late father and the distant CN Tower: "There was that photo on the wall, those eyes that bore into the sides of his head, digging up guilty secrets. And that constant abstract signal in the distance, from the *concrete god* [emphasis added] who didn't care" (176). In essence, this moment marks the apogee of moral indecision with which Nurdin's journey from Dar to the West has incrementally presented him. Facing a moral bifurcation of the self that is similar to Samba's anomic crisis, he finds himself torn between the religious morality of his upbringing and the secular indifference of Toronto's urban cosmopolis.

Yet while Nurdin is attracted by the "concrete god" of secularism that is embodied by the CN Tower, he has not personally mastered the codes of conduct associated with Western existence. Accordingly, he commits an erroneous action that results in his false accusation of rape when he attempts to comfort a disturbed young white woman, whom he encounters in the course of his janitorial rounds at the Ontario Addiction Centre:

> He was almost squatting beside her now, his hand was on her shoulder. He realized he had never been so close to a white woman before… The response, when it came, was not quite what he expected. His hand was still on her shoulder when suddenly she gave the alarm. "Rape!," she cried. "He's trying to rape me." (178-179)

Intertextually, the scene evokes British writer E.M. Forester's classic novel *A Passage to India* (1924), in which the white Englishwoman Adela Quested falsely accuses the Indian Dr. Aziz of rape after becoming hysterical while touring the vast Marabar caves, which are marked by depths that symbolically reinforce the cultural gulf that separates them. In his apparent echoing of this scene, Vassanji illustrates the chasm separating Nurdin from the codes of contemporary Western conduct, for we recognize his innocent indiscretion in touching this disturbed young woman, whom he encounters alone in the Ontario Addiction Centre's basement. Foolishly, the timid Nurdin flees from the scene and fails to report the incident to anyone within the hospital's administrative echelons, thereby lending credence to the notion that he is somehow guilty.[5]

Subsequently finding himself accused of a crime he has not committed and facing the possibility of a criminal conviction, Nurdin realizes that the West is not as "free" as he had once assumed. The fact that one of Nurdin's white colleagues, Mrs. Broadbent, automatically assumes he is guilty gives truth to the lie that racism does not exist in Toronto's multicultural society: "'I'm not going to serve this rapist!' she [Mrs. Broadbent] said… 'Where he comes from, both his hands would be chopped off'" (180). As literary critic Martin Genetsch observes in his book *The Texture of Identity: The Fiction of MG Vassanji, Neil Bissoondath, and Rohinton Mistry* (2007), "Nurdin's racial and religious difference becomes suspect because it is assumed that the Other, i.e. in the context of African-Indian and Muslim, is lewd at heart and, in addition to that, cannot contain his lewdness" (31). Transported to a police station for questioning, Nurdin is subjected to further racist scrutiny, as he is interrogated not just in relation to the rape accusation, but also with respect to "a variety of other crimes" (181).

Previously rendered a second-class citizen in Dar due to his status as an Indian-African during the nationalization period, Nurdin's second-class citizenship is recapitulated in Toronto via his experiences in the wake of his victimization by false accusation. Ultimately, it is the kind yet opportunistic lawyer Jamal who exorcizes Nurdin of the legal demons that unjustly plague him by functioning as a sort of secular shaman. As it turns out, the young woman who has accused Nurdin of rape has done so with the intent of blackmailing him and securing payment in exchange for dropping her charges. While Jamal does not offer payment in the form of money, he negotiates an arrangement that sees him agree to provide free legal services to the family of the woman, who is of Portuguese heritage and has many relatives of "illegal" (205) citizenship status who require counsel.

Yet this is not the only secularized exorcism that occurs within *No New Land*, for Nurdin is also exorcized of the vestiges of Islamic faith that he feels in relation to the memory of his late father. This exorcism occurs when Missionary, the Imam who has made the pilgrimage from Dar to establish a new religious enterprise in Ontario, jokingly dons the red fez that had belonged to Haji Lalani:

> Nurdin recoiled flitting his eyes from his father's hat on the Master's head to his father's picture on the wall, back and forth, several times… That instant the red fez was exorcized. In one stroke that photograph on the wall had lost all potency, its once accusing eyes were now blank, its expression dumb. Suddenly they were here, in the modern world, laughing at the past. (196-197)

Consciously or not, Missionary has also been afflicted by consumerist desires, which Toronto's urban cosmopolis has sparked within him: "He [Missionary] was no ascetic. He liked food, delighted in conveniences and gadgets, and was definitely not one to spurn a car ride instead of walking out in the cold" (190). Even Missionary, it seems, has been partially bewitched by the CN Tower's secular aura, for when Nurdin sardonically identifies this structure as the "god" of Toronto, Missionary's response is not one of indignation but rather gleeful approval: "Ah the CN Tower. I have been to the top of it, many years ago. Excellent restaurant" (186).

Yet while the undeniably astute Martin Genetsch argues that *No New Land* is "not the gloomy and depressing text signalled by its title" (41), I find myself in a position of marked disagreement. In many respects, the conclusion of the novel *is* bleak, as it suggests that Nurdin's Western experiences have so shattered his conception of selfhood that he no longer lives for any other purpose aside from functioning as a human automaton. Simply put, he becomes the figure doomed to endure “life’s drudgeries” that Nanji has earlier associated him with being (84). His spiritual beliefs permanently exorcized, Nurdin is left to live in accordance with the secular synapses blinked out by the distant CN Tower. Although this “concrete god” may have once symbolized the possibility of freedom for Nurdin, it has ultimately bewitched him. Sadly, Nurdin’s newfound secular existence does not lead him to freedom, but rather only to a position of socioeconomic entrapment that renders him a decimated working stiff: “For Nurdin there was the job to think of, which he would resume soon… There was the several weeks lost pay to make up, Fatima’s university fees to save for… And Hanif had a sister who was already nagging him about his future prospects” (207). Although he may have once imagined the possibility of freedom via a liaison with Sushila, Nurdin’s economic pressures and messy legal misadventures effectively render him a vacant, zombified figure.

As the novel’s concluding lines indicate, the possibility of the taste of freedom that Nurdin might have once secured through an affair with Sushila are forever pushed away: “That afternoon of opportunity, the tryst he had almost agreed to – and the freedom it would have led him to – now seemed remote and unreal, had receded into the distance, into another and unknowable world” (208). Ironically enough, Nurdin finds that Toronto ultimately proves *no new land*. Having lived a God-fearing existence in Dar as a second-class citizen, he finds himself merely continuing his second-class citizenship in Toronto, where he trades his fear of a wrathful God for the insatiable anomic fears and longings associated with a secularized “concrete god” of Western commerce, which is embodied by the CN Tower. In the end, Nurdin seems destined to live out the remainder of his life not with a roar but rather a fearful whimper, thereby aligning himself with Thoreau’s infamous lines, “The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation. What is called resignation is confirmed desperation” (9).

Conclusion

Although published roughly thirty years apart and marked by notable stylistic differences, Kane's *Ambiguous Adventure* and Vassanji's *No New Land* bear striking thematic similarities in their respective delineations of the existential crises that Samba and Nurdin undergo due to their traumatic diasporic dispersals. Rather than discovering new self-liberating possibilities by journeying from Africa to the West, both individuals end up experiencing profound existential discombobulation. In this regard, Kane and Vassanji provide readers with bleak yet remarkably raw, honest accounts of the self-rupturing effects that such dispersals sometimes entail. While contemporary Western literature has often stressed the hybridized agency associated with intercultural journeying, both novels ultimately suggest that some individuals find the process of diasporic dispersal so traumatic that conceptions of selfhood rupture faster than new subject positions can be successfully articulated.

Endnotes

[1] In invoking the notion of "selves" falling apart here and in my title, I am playfully riffing on the great Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart* (1958), which is today routinely discussed in relation to postcolonial studies. The title of Achebe's novel is, of course, an allusion to the following introductory lines from William Butler Yeats's poem "The Second Coming" (1919), which function as the novel's epigraph:

> Turning and turning in the widening gyre
> The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
> *Things fall apart* [emphasis added]; the centre cannot hold;
> Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world. (Yeats 1-4, qtd. in Achebe lix)

[2] Although the *trivium* is a Latin pedagogical formulation, its constituent elements – grammar, logic, and rhetoric – were derived from Greek antiquity. Many ancient Greek texts were, of course, introduced to medieval Europe via pivotal intercultural exchange with Islamic scholarship. As scholar Bernard Lewis notes in his controversial yet informative book *What Went Wrong: The Clash Between Islam and Modernity in the Middle East* (2002), "In most of the arts and sciences of civilization, medieval Europe was a pupil and in a sense a dependent of the Islamic world, relying on Arabic versions even more for many otherwise unknown Greek works" (7).

[3] As philosopher Thomas R. Flynn notes in his book *Existentialism: A Very Short Introduction*, Sartrean *angst* is a form of anxiety that arises in the wake of our crushing "awareness of our freedom as the sheer possibility of possibility" (70).

[4] Flynn succinctly defines the Sartrean concept of *bad faith* as follows: "Sartre seems to agree that our usual inclination is to deny responsibility for our situation [i.e. to abnegate responsibility for our own existence], that is, to be in bad faith" (70).

[5] Given the controversial cultural politics surrounding the recent "Me Too" movement, this particular plot point of Vassanji's novel will potentially distress some readers.

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