

VASSANJI'S NOSTALGIA AS SPECULATIVE FICTION

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Abstract : Speculative fiction is a literary “super genre,” which encompasses a number of different genres of fiction, each with speculative elements that are based on conjecture and do not exist in the real world. Sometimes called “what-if” books, speculative literature changes the laws of what’s real or possible as we know them in our current society, and then speculates on the outcome. An inherently plural category, speculative fiction is a mode of thought-experimenting that includes the proliferation of indigenous, minority, and postcolonial narrative forms that subvert dominant Western notions of the real; and the need for new conceptual categories to accommodate diverse and hybrid types of storytelling that oppose a stifling vision of reality imposed by exploitative global capitalism . M.G Vassanji’s latest book *Nostalgia* tries to carry those themes into a new genre, speculative fiction. *Nostalgia* is set in a futuristic Toronto where the rich live forever by erasing their memories and implanting new ones. If memory is erased, the only thing left is the body. . The futuristic setting allows Vassanji to explore anxieties about migration, race mixing, and the unequal distribution of wealth with a clinical but compassionate eye.

Key words : Speculative fiction, hybridization, science fiction, dystopia, futuristic fiction ,migration ,race mixing ,post colonial narrative

Speculative fiction arose in response to the need for a blanket term for a broad range of narrative that subverts the post-Enlightenment mindset. Speculative fiction emerges as a tool to dismantle the traditional Western cultural bias in favor of literature imitating reality, and as a quest for the recovery of the sense of awe and wonder. Some of the forces that contributed to the rise of speculative fiction include accelerating genre hybridization that balkanized the field previously mapped with a few large generic categories. An inherently plural category, speculative fiction is a mode of thought-experimenting that includes the proliferation of indigenous, minority, and postcolonial narrative forms that subvert dominant Western notions of the real; and the need for new conceptual categories to accommodate diverse and hybridic types of storytelling that oppose a stifling vision of reality imposed by exploitative global capitalism .

The term is often attributed to Robert A. Heinlein. The term “speculative fiction” has three historically located meanings: a subgenre of science fiction that deals with human rather than technological problems, a genre distinct from and opposite to science fiction in its exclusive focus on possible futures, and a super category for all genres that deliberately depart from imitating consensus reality of everyday experience. In this latter sense, speculative fiction includes fantasy, science fiction, and horror, but also their derivatives, hybrids, and cognate genres like the gothic, dystopia, weird fiction, post-apocalyptic fiction, ghost stories, superhero tales, alternate history, steam punk, slipstream, magic realism, and fractured fairy tales.

M. G. Vassanji is one of the most distinct literary celebrities of South Asian Canadian literature. His works focused on colonialism, immigration and the search for identity in a cruel, complex world. His latest book *Nostalgia* tries to carry those themes into a new genre, speculative fiction. *Nostalgia* is set in a futuristic Toronto where the rich live forever by erasing their memories and implanting new ones. If memory is erased, the only thing left is the body. However, in Vassanji’s world a new body can be provided when the new memories are implanted, so people aren’t becoming immortal; they are becoming new people.

The setting of the novel is the future. The strength of the novel lies in the development of the protagonist, Dr. Frank Sina. He specializes in helping people whose memories from past lives keep seeping in. When one patient tells Sina about such recollections, Sina realizes he remembers those moments too, and the rest of the book follows Sina's attempt to discover his past life. The story contains lots of fast-paced elements: public self-immolation, an illicit affair, a high-stakes kidnapping. *Nostalgia* features the classic dystopian panopticon society, where the government is constantly watching everyone. As Sina delves deeper into his past, the government installs a camera in his office and assigns someone to tail him. Yet somehow, he is able to evade the government at the climax of the book. In this world with sufficiently advanced technology to have "immortality" and humans living on other planets, the basics of society seem oddly unchanged. Sina see patients, has dinner at an elite club and then goes home and watches the news on TV. The artificial intelligence in Sina's computer sounds a few years ahead of Apple's Siri, and government monitoring of people through their computers is already happening.

The book explores two fascinating philosophical questions: the morality of living forever and whether kidnapping and other tactics used by insurgent groups can be justified. The story Vassanji tells in *Nostalgia*, set in our media and technologically driven culture, is advanced only a few years ahead of Vassanji's present. The great trick of this world is a bio-technological advance that allows scientists to probe areas of the brain so as to create artificial memories.

The hero of the novel, Doctor Frank Sina, lives a very comfortable life in a developed country bordering on a third world region rife with civil war, corruption, disease, crumbling infrastructure and other signs of social collapse. Even in Sina's own country there are dismal neighbourhoods of crime and decay. Vassanji is unusual among future fiction writers in that he gives a role to traditional religion in his dystopia, a role that is neither ironic nor condescending. In the darkest heart of the urban slums, for example, a presumably Christian congregation worships God and helps its members survive the harshness of daily existence. The past has always plagued M.G. Vassanji's diasporic, mixed-race characters. It haunts and nags, percolating into their lives in inconvenient ways until the inevitable reckoning.

Treating nostalgia-afflicted NGs is the full-time job of Frank Sina, a doctor at the Sunflower Centre for Human Rejuvenation. As the data associated with people's previous identities are permanently discarded (or so the government claims), Frank doesn't know his patients' true pasts, but some are dark indeed. "Rejuvies" include refugees, war criminals or terrorists from across the Long Border that protects the North Atlantic Alliance from Maskinia, a loosely defined region of ex-European colonies whose inhabitants speak a Babel-like mix of Arabic, English and African languages. Though Maskinia is considered lawless and barbaric, it's exploited by the NAA for its valuable resources as well as its inhabitants' genetic material. Those seeking "authentic" experiences still travel there, though the recent abduction of a young reporter, Holly Chu, has served as a reminder of the region's dangers. The rejuvenation process has a curiously literary bent. Assigning a new personality is called "publishing". Frank's job, which involves debugging people's personal fictions and smoothing out their inconsistencies.

The first scuff in the veneer of Frank's life comes the day Presley Smith, a part-time security guard with a taste for Wagner, combat games and bright yellow socks, walks into his office. Presley's red afro, pale skin and green eyes flag him as the work of the legendary, and whimsical, Author X. But something about Presley resonates with Frank more deeply. He feels an inexplicable bond with this eccentric, nervous man. When he comes for his next appointment, Presley claims, unconvincingly, that his memories are under control, and then promptly disappear. Presley's "fiction" – as personal histories are called in Vassanji's imagined world – unfolds alongside the story of Holly Chu, a news reporter who has crossed into the land of Maskinia, a fictional country that is a composite of third world ills and grievances.

Vassanji takes his readers to a future divided between the affluent First World, here dubbed the North Atlantic Alliance, and an amalgam of poor and underdeveloped countries. In the process, he rearranges Earth's geography such that the U.S., Canada, and Europe all share a common border. In this new world reorder, scientific progress has unlocked the secret to immortality through regeneration of both bodies and minds. Humans who can afford it undergo procedures that implant new memories in new bodies.

As a piece of speculative fiction, *Nostalgia* establishes and sustains the internal logic of a world in which the future feels at once far-fetched and recognizable. Always a visual writer, Vassanji is virtually cinematic in his evocation of a dysfunctional, futuristic Toronto that's only one or two unhinged mayors away from becoming a reality. Speculative fiction may not be native to the author of *The Book of Secrets* and *The Assassin's Song*, but Vassanji wears its Orwellian garb well. This novel is an extended political treatise on the divisions of our world – the young and old, the rich and poor, the migrants and the old stock – that *Nostalgia* thrills, inspires, and, in its best moments, provokes. The futuristic setting allows Vassanji to explore anxieties about migration, race mixing, and the unequal distribution of wealth with a clinical but compassionate eye. Vassanji takes inequality to its logical, perhaps inevitable extreme, but distills the various factions duking it out into a taut narrative of love and betrayal. Frank lives with Joanie, a member of the new generation, who loves him but cheats on him, and he seems infatuated with another younger woman.

As *Nostalgia* draws to a close that unites the doctor, patient, and missing reporter, the reader realizes that memories of other Vassanji novels have been leaking into this new book. As the titular character in *The In-Between World* of Vikram Lall and Kamal Punja in *The Magic of Saida* did before them, characters in *Nostalgia* forfeit the future in pursuit of their pasts. In other words, the past haunts the future and the future longs for the past. The novel not only speaks to the morality of life and its longevity, and the means of manipulating memory in individuals, but also speaks to the wider issue of the disparaging view towards people and cultures that suffer from environmental chaos, financial poverty, government neglect, and political unrest.

The characters represent these dissident voices: the doctor whose role it is to provide new memories for eligible candidates that wish to remove themselves from the current life they are participating in, to analyzing those who suffer from Leaked Memory Syndrome, otherwise known as Nostalgia, when memories from one's unknown past leak into the conscious mind threatening to unravel the person's mind and body altogether.

In *Nostalgia's* Canada, people forget where they come from. Collectively as well, they forget their unsavory political connections to the impoverished south, although occasionally they air-drop care packages behind the Long Border or send in volunteers. Erasing the inconvenient past may sound like a definition of Utopia, but not everyone is pleased. A number of religious orders protest immortality on Earth, and young people—including Joanie—demonstrate against high unemployment. With *Nostalgia* Vassanji has moved from his community's neglect of its history to the geopolitical consequences of forgetting the past. Despite his playful demeanor, Vassanji crushes Canadians' perception of themselves as a generous, tolerant nation. In all these ways, speculative fiction represents a global reaction of human creative imagination struggling to envision a possible future at the time of a major transition from local to global humanity. As a post colonial writer, it is important for Vassanji to talk about the past (had done in his earlier works) in order to think about the future. This is the creative burden of the writer, who becomes in Vassanji's own words:

...a presever of the collective tradition, a folk historian and a myth maker. He gives himself a history; he recreates the past...

Having reclaimed it, having given himself a history he liberates himself to write about the future. (*Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British rule in India.*)

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