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## Memory And Identity: A Postcolonial Reading of M. G. Vassanji's Novel Nostalgia

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### Abstract

M. G. Vassanji is a Kenyan-born Canadian novelist and editor. His parents immigrated to Africa even before Vassanji was born. Although Vassanji was born in Kenya, he was raised in Tanzania. He is now settled in Canada. He has travelled to different countries and has acquired different diasporic experiences in the postcolonial world. Most of his works, in general, portray the colonial and the postcolonial world. His novel *Nostalgia* is one such speculative novel that brings to light the other side of the technologically advanced postcolonial world. The advancement of technology aimed to support mankind had begun to manipulate human lives and values. *Nostalgia* tries to unveil the lives of immigrants who try to identify themselves in their mad pursuit of life. They are stuck between reality and made-to-believe life. The consequences of the "in between-life" are woven throughout the plot of the novel. The postcolonial period has seen so much growth and development in technology and the economy. But, on the other side, human values are on the verge of being forgotten. This article will analyse some of those instances from the novel *Nostalgia* to validate the importance of unveiling the concealed side of the technologically advanced postcolonial world. Every postcolonial experience in the present-day world shows that humans are being used and materials are being loved.

**Keywords:** Postcolonialism, Diaspora, Identity Crisis, Nostalgia, Memory

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### 1. Introduction to Postcolonial Theory

Postcolonial theory, as a critical approach, deals with the literary works produced mostly by writers from the colonized countries. It establishes colonial and postcolonial concepts like diaspora, otherness, resistance, hybridity, nationality, subjectivity, multiculturalism, and ideology. The theory analyses the literature that showcases the harsh realities of colonial experiences that are overshadowed by the authoritative powers and technological advancements. It also examined the outcome of culture clashes and ideological conflicts that arose because of migrations where various cultures and ideologies met. The aspects of superiority and dominance over the vulnerable and the colonized people were brought to light.

### 2. M.G. Vassanji as a Postcolonial Writer

Some of the major theorists of Postcolonial theory include Edward Said, Gayathri Spivak, Homi K. Bhabha, and Frantz Fanon. This theory created an intellectual space for them to communicate their postcolonial trauma to the outside world. The subjugations that they had faced had shattered them, and the postcolonial theory provided them a role in literature to record all they had been through because of colonialism. Among the prominent postcolonial



writers, Moyez G. Vassanji is a major contemporary postcolonial writer. He is a Kenyan-born Canadian novelist and editor. He has so far authored ten novels, most of which have an autobiographical touch and highlight the different dimensions of postcolonial challenges. He has portrayed the nuances of multiculturalism, longing for the roots, search for identity, political influences, love, and passion.

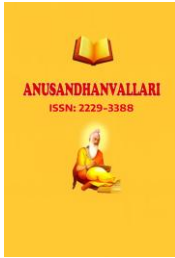
### 3. A Brief Note on *Nostalgia*

Vassanji's novel *Nostalgia*, though a futuristic and speculative 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 – ...[It] thrills, inspires, and, in its best moments, provokes." (Al-Solaylee). It narrates how humanity has started fading away from people. The authoritative power uses people, especially immigrants, as scapegoats for their experiments. They are monitored throughout their life, depriving them of their privacy. The influence of technology in the postcolonial world has a very prominent role in modern everyday life. Technological advancements and postcolonial concerns have developed simultaneously, posing a threat to human existence and human values. During the colonial period, colonial power was used as a tool to make the colonized people slaves. But in the postcolonial world, the authoritative power uses technology as a tool to make people their slaves. Most of the time, the darker side of technological advancements is concealed under the luxurious and easy-going ways of life. Vassanji has very efficiently tried to weave the challenges of the contemporary postcolonial world and the unspoken part of technological advancements together in his novel *Nostalgia*, a perfect portrayal of modern postcolonial life where technology has begun to replace humanity.

### 4. Humans and Implanted Memories - A Postcolonial Representation

The characters in this novel search for their true self in a world that hovers around technological advancements. Though technology is meant to support human existence, it is used by the Authority in a way that makes human beings a tool for experimentation. In this novel, the Authority tries to defy Nature in the name of technological advancements and experiments to support human life. Humans are implanted with new memories, believing that the process would extend their lifespan. There is a thirst for immortality behind the process, and it is said to be in the beginning stage. The Authority says, "We humans have striven for immortality...Even if the brain allowed such storage capacity, who would want to be burdened by quantities of redundant, interfering memories? Painful and messy ones...it's selected portions of long-term memory we renew. New memory in new bodies. New lives." (7) The old memories are removed from the individual, and new memories that would be in favour of the Authority are implanted in them.

With the renewal of memories, they become a new version of themselves, and they are called the Authority's creation. This can be seen as a symbolic representation of the postcolonial attitude where people are forced to give up their past and accept their new environment to cope with their present life. The colonial exposure has created a strong postcolonial attitude where people stumble between different scenarios of life. People migrate in large numbers to improve their standard of living and earn a livelihood. But it is a traumatic experience for the migrants to leave behind their past for their survival. To keep themselves stable in the new environment, they have to push back the past that nurtured them and create new memories in their present life. When they are trying to cope with the new life, their memories of the past keep haunting them, and they are forced to live with them. Nightmares, dreams, and hallucinations become a part of their life, which does not even allow them to have peaceful sleep.



## 5. Presley Smith and Dr. Frank Sina:

Presley Smith, the central character in the novel, was one of those who underwent the process of implantation of new memories. He was from Maskinia, a fictional country representing the downtrodden condition of Third World countries. He was trained as an electrician, and he moved to Toronto to earn his livelihood. The Authority chose him as he was an immigrant, and they felt he could be a threat to their country. So, they wanted to erase his real thoughts and memories and feed him with new and fake memories. He was monitored day and night, and he was kept under surveillance for the rest of his life. Though he was made to forget his past, he was not able to get rid of it completely. He began to see images and hear noises that disturbed his mental stability. His past kept haunting him severely through dreams and noises in his sleep, and he was advised to seek the help of a doctor named Frank Sina.

Dr. Frank Sina, the narrator of the novel, was also from Maskinia. He left Maskinia to pursue medicine, and he became a doctor in Toronto. He worked for the Authority and treated those who suffered from the side effects of the implantation process, especially the leaked memory syndrome called Nostalgia. When he spoke about Presley's condition, he said, "It was the seventh or eighth time he'd had it, he told me. Each time this phenomenon in his mind began with one persistent thought, a string of words that had no meaning for him. *It's midnight, the lion is out.*" (2) Presley Smith had a haunting thought that disturbed his sleep every night. Even his everyday life became tormenting due to the clash of memories.

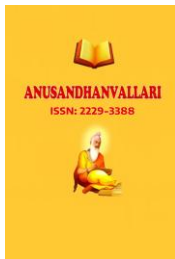
## 6. The Tormenting Past

During the sessions, Dr. Frank Sina asked Presley if he had any other visions that disturbed him. Presley replied with hesitation that he had visions of the "red bumper of an antique car, and part of a fender." (2) His visions were representations of his past, but he could not realise what they really were. Presley, too, tried to figure out the connection between his dreams and his life. He began to hide himself from the Authority and made efforts to put an end to his trauma. This worsened Presley's condition, and Frank felt helpless.

Frank was worried about Presley and his haunting visions. These haunting memories were a part of the lives of the immigrants who left their native land for various reasons. During the initial days, the immigrants were excited about the new life. But when all the excitement faded away, and they were forced to face reality, they began to think about the past that had kept them secure once upon a time. Their struggles and suffering in the new life in the host land made them long for their homeland. But they had to adapt to the new life for the sake of fulfilling the purpose of their migration. Their economic needs had to be met at the cost of their peace of mind.

## 7. The Leaked Memory Syndrome

Presley kept consulting Frank whenever there was a need. Presley said to Frank, "Something left over from a previous memory? A life I left behind a long time ago." (3) Frank explained Presley's condition as "Leaked memory syndrome – Nostalgia...Reminders of our discarded lives cannot yet be completely blocked." (3) Presley was able to realize that the dreams and noises were connected to his real past and that he was being manipulated by the Authority. The real memories began to clash with the fake implanted memories, and this was traumatizing Presley. This had been the condition of the immigrants who migrated to another land for various reasons. Though the immigrants tried to give up the ethnic values of their native to the foreign land, they were forced to manage the cultural conflicts within themselves. Giving up their ethnicity felt like betraying their homeland. A sense of longing for their native land always hovered around them as they felt lost in their mad pursuit of livelihood. They often ended up "unhappy with their current lives." (55) The immigrants' expectations of their new life were



shattered when they had to go through the harsh realities. Their chase for a happy life was in vain, and they had to adapt to the experiences they were forced to face.

### **8. Authority - Representing the Colonial Power**

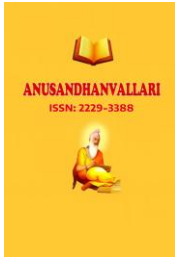
In the novel, people were kept under the control of the Authority, and they were watched. The Authority justified their process of renewing the memories by saying, “to those who come here we give a better life, longevity – immortality, or the possibility of.” (68) In the postcolonial scenario, the immigrants were made to believe that the best life was in the Western world and that it was worth any struggle to live there. The authoritative host land needed these immigrants to work for them and to enrich their status. The immigrants were considered mere slaves who would work for them under any circumstances. They were being used by those in power, as they very well knew that the immigrants wanted financial stability at any cost. The authorities posed as if they were very much concerned about the welfare of the immigrants. But, in reality, it was just an eyewash so that they would not be blamed. The authorities never wanted to trust the immigrants as their own people, and they were kept under surveillance all the time. They just wanted the manpower, but not the people.

### **9. Humans - the “Creations”**

At one point in time, Presley hid himself from the Authority and decided to live a life of his own. But it was not possible because he had already accepted and undergone the process of being subject to implanted memories. Somehow, he managed to escape from the eyes of the Authority. But the Authority kept searching for him, and they did not stop chasing him. Frank tried to save Presley from the hands of Mr. X, the authoritative figure for whom Frank was working. Mr. X said to Frank about Presley, “He’s our responsibility, Dr. Sina. We’re not so unfeeling, we do take care of our own creations.” (106) According to the Authority, the immigrants who had gone through the process were just creations. Everything became materialistic, and the scope for human values began to deteriorate. The immigrants were treated as samples for experimentation rather than human beings. The word “creations” shows that they are seen as products of their experiments and not humans. The impact of colonial superiority kept chasing the immigrants, and they had to suffer under the imperial attitude. The immigrants were just sources of workforce, and they were of no concern apart from that.

### **10. Struggle for Identity**

Presley’s haunting visions worsened as days went on. He wanted to know who he really was. His conflicting thoughts agonized him, yet he tried hard to understand what his visions were all about. This mental struggle was typical of the immigrants who strived to mimic the lifestyle of the natives. In the process of adapting themselves to the alien land, they tried to hide their native self and put on a mask. Even though it seemed to go well in the beginning, it became traumatic when days went by. They struggled hard to become completely transformed individuals in the process of adapting themselves to the new environment. But even then, they were not accepted by the natives as one among them. This gave the immigrants a sense of alienation. They felt left out, and they desperately needed a space to be loved and accepted. It felt like a tiring journey as they had to keep their mind stable and concentrate on creating an identity for themselves. They had to wear a mask to feel accepted, and at the same time, they felt like losing themselves in the attempt to find their space. But it was too traumatizing, and they felt like losing their mental strength and stability. Being fed up with disappointments, they yearned to get back to their roots. They thought getting back to their roots would give them contentment. Therefore, the chase to



find themselves an identity kept going even as the years went by. It took them years to deal with all the hardships and stabilize their life. By the time they stabilized their life, almost half of their life had gone.

### 11. The Urge to Know the Roots

Presley, though he knew he would be tracked by Mr. X, was determined to know his past – his roots. Frank was sure that Mr. X would never do any good if Presley was caught because the truth would be revealed to the outside world, and he would be in great trouble. So, he wanted to help Presley get back what he had lost. Joe Green, one of Frank's acquaintances, said, "Presley's previous life contains details that are too sensitive and should not come out – and they will not do him any good either." (107) The Authority was very particular about not letting out the secret about their experimentation. They were not concerned about the welfare of Presley, but the safety of their secret mission. Presley was seen as a puppet, and the authorities decided for Presley. He was not seen as an individual who had his own life and thoughts. This attitude was the reflection of the superiority complex of the authorities who were in power. Though direct colonization was over, the imperial attitude and superiority complex prevailed in the Western world. They just wanted the immigrants to be under their control.

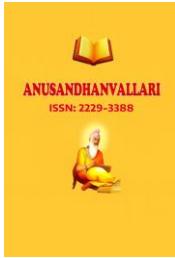
As days passed by, Presley's condition went out of control. He began to blabber something, and there were behavioural changes in him. Frank was too obsessed with Presley, and he even developed a bond with Presley that he could not explain. His eagerness to know the life of Presley grew stronger, and he even found his hideout to meet him there in private. During the earlier days of migration, the immigrants who had no proper documents were treated meanly. They had to hide themselves under the guise of someone else. They had to live in darkness, without showing their true identity. They had to be cautious enough not to get caught. If they were caught, they had to face imprisonment, or they were sent back to their homeland, and it would cost their life. Presley was almost in such a condition that his life would be at stake if he were caught by the Authority. While Presley was in the church with Edwina, his guardian, he went out of control. She informed Frank about it, and he left for the church immediately.

"– Doctor, you've got to come. He's raving beyond control.

A quaver in the voice.

– I'm coming right away." (192)

The Authority somehow became aware that Frank was helping Presley. Frank, too, was aware that he was constantly followed and his conversations were monitored. But he did not bother about anything and went to the church. There, he saw Presley "lying on the carpeted steps leading up to the stage, his face contorted in a grimace and covered with beads of sweat, his mouth open, spit trickling down his chin." (194) Frank was heartbroken at the sight of Presley. When Edwina bent to wipe the face of Presley, he said, "...can't control myself...my self wants to come out." (194) Presley's real memory and the implanted memory conflicted too hard, which shattered his mental stability. He wanted to be his real self. But he could not do anything about it, and Frank too stood there helpless. Most of the time, the immigrants tried hard to hide their real selves. But when they were forced to face extreme hardships, they wanted to be their real self and they longed to get back to their roots. But they were restrained from being their real self as they had become a transformed individual for so long. They had almost forgotten who they were, and their past kept clashing with the present. It was traumatic for them to identify themselves in the chaos created in their mind. Their mental stability was completely shattered, and they found themselves broken amidst all the struggle.



## 12. The Realization of the Past

Through the conversation between Edwina and Frank over the phone, the Authority came to know the whereabouts of Presley and the representatives rushed to the spot. They had brought an ambulance along with them and took Presley away. Frank and Edwina could not do anything but watch everything that was happening. Edwina took Frank to her apartment to stay there that night. She gave him Presley's notebook in which Presley had written "My name is Amirul. I had a cousin who was my teacher called Elim. I loved him very much. I lived in a compound...". (198) After reading the sentence, Frank realized that Presley's real name was Amirul and his cousin Elim was none other than Frank himself. Frank realized that he was Elim since he, too, had a clash of memories at times. He, too, had suffered from clashing memories as he had also been subjected to the process of implanted memories. Both of them had been under different identities all along, and only after those traumatic experiences did they realise who they really were. The haunting visions Presley had been those of his real past. The reason behind the bonding between Frank and Presley was that they were cousins, Amirul and Elim, and they were from the same place, Maskinia. By the time Frank realized their real identities, it was too late, as he could not do anything to help Presley, who was taken by the Authority. Frank later came to know that Presley had passed away peacefully. Frank felt sorry for Presley, and he then decided to leave for his native, Maskinia.

Both Frank and Presley had been completely different personalities without being aware of their real self. There was an emptiness in their life, though they seemed to have a better economic status. Their real past haunted them, and the memories of their past kept tormenting them. When they began to realise their origin, they longed to get back to their roots. Though Presley could not fulfill his wish to be his real self, Frank almost succeeded in getting back to his native. The emptiness is present in every immigrant's life, and the search for a contented life remains never-ending.

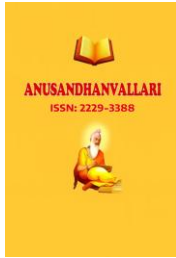
## 13. Conclusion

The lives of Frank and Presley are examples of those who experience the darker effects of the postcolonial world. Any individual who moved to different places had to undergo various life-challenging experiences for the sake of survival. Though migration had been portrayed as a way for growth and development, there were also a lot of sacrifices and hardships one had to live through. They had to transform themselves so that they could fit into the mad pursuit of life. People lose their identity and take up a fake one to survive the hardships they are forced to face.

In this technologically advanced modern postcolonial world, humanity is gradually deteriorating, which has gone unnoticed most of the time. Those in authority use their power to suppress those who are under them and control their life for their convenience. Technological advancements have become a tool for the authorities in modern postcolonial life, which has created a huge impact on human existence. The transformations an individual undergoes are mostly psychological and unconscious. Human life is becoming too complicated and lifeless. Technology is being adored, and human values are being taken for granted. Though technological advancements are inevitable in our modern postcolonial world, it is high time that we realize to retain human values that would keep human existence soulful in this world. Vassanji has, thus, presented these nuances of modern postcolonial life intrinsically in his speculative novel, *Nostalgia*, paving the way for a better human existence.

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