

*Negotiating Place:
Identity and Community in
M. G. Vassanji's "Uhuru Street"*

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AN IMPORTANT PART of Canadian multicultural literature deals with the process of achieving selfhood for the between-world subject. Many of the writers question through their fiction what determines identity and creates community, signaling how geographical, ethnic, political, and cultural makeup and differences serve as signifying aspects of this complex self. The question of perception and the problematic aspects of the representation of this intricate self in fiction has led to the expansion of a literary genre exceptionally suited to the task of articulating and elaborating distinctiveness. A survey of multicultural fiction in Canada demonstrates a proliferation of the short story cycle, a hybrid form that many ethnic writers have adopted and cultivated as a tool to enact their dramas. Through an analysis of M. G. Vassanji's *Uhuru Street* (1991), this paper explores the use of the short story cycle as a vehicle for the development of Canadian ethnic fiction. I contend that the genre highlights the drama of identity and community executed by this writer, specifically through the manner in which place is negotiated and appropriated, a theme that recurs in other multicultural writing.

The dynamics of the short story cycle make it appropriate for the new definition of cultural pluralism that incorporates immigrant legacies while adapting to the practices of the culture in which these works are created. Forrest Ingram defines the cycle as "a set of stories linked to each other in such a way as to maintain a balance between the individuality of each of the stories and the necessities of the larger unit. . . [so] that the reader's successive experience in various levels of the pattern of the whole

significantly modifies his experience of each of its component parts" (15). The term "short story cycle" implies a principle of organization, a structural scheme for the working out of an idea, characters, or themes, even a disposition in which the constituent narratives are simultaneously independent and interdependent. The structure of a cycle emerges from the interaction of the diverse elements in the relatively independent components while connective patterns on all levels draw these together into a totality strengthened by varying types of internal cohesion. The principal approaches to the necessary unity tend to involve the process of development of a character; a dominant, explicit theme, such as a generation gap or search for identity; or the delineation of a particular locale or community. Nonetheless, as Ingram emphasizes, the most pervasive unifying pattern of short story cycles is the dynamic pattern of recurrent development (17). This affects all the elements of the narrative: the themes, leitmotifs, settings, characters, and structures of the individual stories and, in consequence, the entire collection as a whole. The repetition of a theme from different perspectives, for instance, and its ensuing growth in depth in the mind of the reader may unify a cycle at the same time that it individualizes each story.

The specificities of the form make the short story cycle an especially pertinent vehicle for ethnic fiction in general. Occupying an odd, indeterminate place within the field of narrative, the cycle resembles the novel in its totality, yet is composed of distinct stories. The ethnic writer's decision to write a short story cycle is emblematic of a creative position, almost an optical illusion, being two things at the same time, and creating something totally new. In other words, the choice functions as a metaphor for negotiation of identity. Elizabeth Ordoñez signals in this regard that the "disruption of genre" is a common thread that links various ethnic texts: "the text itself becomes both the means and embodiment of modifying and reshaping. . . history, myths, and ultimately personal and collective identity" (19). The ethnic short story cycle enacts the enigma of ethnicity by formally materializing the trope of doubleness, presenting the between-world condition via a form that itself vacillates between two

genres. Hybridity, an important characteristic of all ethnic literary texts, does not imply a denial of the traditions from which it springs, but rather focuses on a continual and mutual development. Furthermore, such a fusion of modes "imposes new strategies of reading in which the movement from one story to the next necessitates reorientation, just as the uneasy reciprocity between part and whole conditions the ongoing determination of meaning" (Kennedy, "Towards" 14).

Gerald Lynch has analyzed extensively the appropriateness of the short story cycle for the concerns of Canadian writers intent on portraying a particular region or community, its history, its characters, its concerns. He points out that even such early cycles such as D. C. Scott's *In the Village of Viger* (1896) and Stephen Leacock's *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* (1912) portray the struggles of small communities for coherence and survival under contrary pressures from metropolitanism and modernity in a form that mirrors the struggle between cohesion and a kind of entropy, or between solidarity and fragmentation, between things holding together and things pulling apart (93). Although the subjects or themes of cycles are not limited, one repeatedly discovers that twentieth-century cycles tend to be preoccupied with isolation, disintegration, indeterminacy, the role of the artist, and the maturation process (Mann 13-14). More specifically, the between-world situation leads the writer to engage in an intense reworking of questions such as oppositionality, marginality, boundaries, displacement, and authenticity: a process that requires constant variation and review. This process does not differ from that involved in the appreciation of a story cycle, in which the evolution and gradual unfolding of the themes, a discovery of unity in disunity, integrates the essence of the form. Furthermore, insisting on a unitary identity can be a way of opposing and defending oneself from marginalization. The fact that short story cycles exist in all the different ethnic literatures in Canada also signals the appropriateness of the form to portray similar experiences. Rachna Mara's *Of Customs and Excise* (1991), Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny*

Boy (1994), Dianne Maguire's *Dry Land Tourist* (1991), Rohinton Mistry's *Tales From Firozsha Baag* (1987), and Wayson Choy's *The Jade Peony* (1997) are a small sample of recent ethnic short story cycles. Because it is a form that has not been favored in the dominant cultures, it allows writers to work with subversive irony. As such, the short story cycle may be viewed as a formal manifestation of the pluralistic culture that creates and nourishes it.

It is clear, therefore, why Canadian writers may regard the short story cycle as a particularly flexible and resilient medium for recording their impressions of a changing landscape. The defining characteristic of the Canadian short story cycle becomes, then, not strictly a matter of place, but rather a matter of consciousness; social and cultural determinants of a specifically Canadian kind continue to inform the stories, whether the setting is London or Toronto, giving the works of Canadian writers immense significance in terms of ideological and linguistic difference (Regan 108). This is the tension reflected in Vassanji's *Uhuru Street*, which, although not primarily set in Canada, is a postcolonial meditation on the immigrant's world. In this narrative, which focuses on the evolution of a particular place, there is the recognition that the "culture" of a nation is shaped by the complex processes of memory and language as well as by identifiable historical events. *Uhuru Street* itself, the organizing concept and unifying principle of the cycle, functions as both a social structure and a configuration of consciousness and memory, subject to historical change and psychological disturbance, profoundly affecting those who live there, those who leave, and those who return.

Vassanji's principal manifestation of both the immigrant's double perspective and his own insight on binary categories of belonging comes through in his emphasis on geographical position. As Linda Warley has written, preoccupation with setting has particular valency for postcolonial subjects since their home locations have been historically constructed as peripheral: "At stake here is more than local colour, painting in words a landscape against which the 'I' can authentically figure" (25). A major feature of Canadian literature is the concern with either devel-

oping or recovering an appropriate identifying relationship between self and place because it is precisely within the parameters of place that the process of subjectivity can be conducted. "Place" is characterized, first, by a sense of displacement in those who have moved to the colonies, or the more widespread sense of displacement from the imported language, of a gap between the experienced environment and the descriptions the language provides, and, second, by a sense of the immense investment of culture in the construction of place (Ashcroft 391). Vassanji's story cycle begins by establishing setting. Engaged in a project of imaginative possession of place, the foreword locates Uhuru Street as both a physical place and a construct with imaginative life in the minds and hearts of those who began life there.

Dar es Salaam is a city on the east coast of Africa, a coast that over the centuries was visited by Arab, Indian and European: traveller and merchant, slave trader, missionary and coloniser. Some 50 miles away on the Indian Ocean lies the former metropolis and slave market of the area, the isle of cloves, Zanzibar, barely visible on a clear day by some accounts. . . . Once upon a time Uhuru Street was called Kichwele Street. The change marked a great event in the country. Uhuru means "independence." This street of independence ran through the city. It began in the hinterland of exclusively African settlements, came downtown lined by Indian shops, and ended at the ocean. Here, where ocean liners came from distant lands, where a German ship was sunk to prevent a British warship from coming up close, where dhows once brought traders from Cutch and Kathiawad and Oman when the Trade Winds allowed, where the new quays were named after Princess Margaret after the old ones were destroyed by fire, Uhuru Street met the world. (xi-xii)

Nostalgia tinges Vassanji's evocation of this particular place, a disappearing world. For the author, *Uhuru Street* is a collection of short stories which deals with a view to recreate Dar es Salaam where I grew up, during a specific period. And what I thought of doing was just to basically turn off and turn on lights, in a manner of speaking, one by one so each short story would be a flicker of light and then you would have a whole street emerging. . . . [E]ssentially that's what I was trying to do as that street and that life will in a few years be almost non-existent. ("Interview" 21)

Jaqueline Bardolph has suggested that the title of the story cycle may have its origin in C. F. Cavafy's poem "The City," which also gave Vassanji's novel *No New Land* a title:

You tell yourself I'll be gone
 To some other land, some other sea,
 to a city lovelier far than this . . .
 There's no new land, my friend, no
 New sea; for the city will follow you,
 In the same streets you'll wander endlessly. (83)

This insight implies that the representation of place in the cycle involves the negotiation of a present condition, more than merely the recollection of the past. The narrative becomes the author's chance to immerse himself imaginatively in the world of Dar es Salaam. In particular, he focuses on the players in the history of the double migration of South Asians: on the one hand, the Indian Muslims who made their first voyage to East Africa in the late nineteenth century as part of the labor mobility within the British empire, working as semi-skilled laborers, small traders, and junior colonial functionaries. On the other hand, he recreates the second voyage that began in the 1960s with the tide of immigration from postcolonial Africa toward Europe and North America.

Character portrayal in *Uhuru Street* corresponds to the traditional cyclic pattern of the genre; those personages who appear in more than one story of the cycle rarely occupy the centre of the action in all the stories. While some short story cycles are unified by a single protagonist, others contain a series of different protagonists or an evolving prototype. The gradual revelation of character through apparently random glimpses emphasizes the idea of a personal and cultural identity as a collective self, shared by people with a common history and ancestry, providing a consistent frame of reference and meaning. Ethnic identity is, most often, "a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being.' It belongs to the future as much as to the past. . . . [I]dentities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past" (Hall 227). As such, the act of amalgamation required for the understanding of the short story cycle corresponds to that needed for the consolidation of the ethnic identity portrayed. About half of the stories in *Uhuru Street* are narrated in first person, emphasizing personal dramas of identity; the remainder are recounted mainly from a third-person viewpoint,

expanding the range of subject and consciousness to give a many-toned portrait of the street—this, perhaps, to fulfill the author's desire "to write a kind of people's history, but make it personal" (Smith 29). As Arun Mukherjee points out, the stories in *Uhuru Street* are not focused solely on an individual's private life or a personal learning experience but on the individual enmeshed first within the family and then within the larger Asian community whose interactions with the African and European communities are severely limited due to the hierarchies of the colonial order (165).

The shifting of narratorial position in the diverse stories simultaneously provides objective and subjective perspectives on the recreation of place, alternating between an opening outward and a turning inward. There is a group of stories that outlines, in Bardolph's words, "sensual retracing of moments of childhood" (85). Two of the protagonist-narrators are young boys, and their viewpoint provides enriching glimpses of their multifarious world, as they try to understand the relationships between the people of Uhuru Street: rich and poor, Africans and Asians, Catholic Goans and Muslims, or even various Moslem groups. A whole way of life is evoked for the reader as the child narrators watch the neighbors across the road, the family upstairs, the shopkeepers at the end of the street. Uhuru Street becomes a stage that "provides narratives and comments on its own history: legends are shown in the making as gossip circulates, judgments are passed, retribution is examined. The street does not know it, but it is then busy constructing its own myth, even in the form of snippets which form the core of each piece" (Bardolph 85). The experience of discovery and the observation of variety are essential to all the stories, even those not recounted in first person. Each story illustrates characteristics of the actors in the drama of Uhuru Street, stressing personal tensions and struggles, some comic, many poignant in their depiction of the workings of binary categories of judgment and behaviour.

Connective strands serve to draw the individuals of any short story cycle into a single community. These bonds may range from familial relationships to friendship, to belonging to the same

town, ethnic group, or gender. However this community may be achieved, it usually can be said to constitute the central character of a cycle (Ingram 22). In the ethnic short story cycle, what we know of as community acquires a symbolic formation rather than a natural essence, existing insofar as the people who make up that community experience it as members. The passage from appreciation of individual stories to the whole presented in the cycle also marks the shift from individual to community; and it constantly sets the individual against the social group to which he or she belongs. Specifically, the genre demonstrates a resemblance to the formation of a community in its dynamic structure of connection and disconnection. The connections that need to be established will therefore yield what Kennedy has called the “defining experience” of the short story cycle: a vision of unity or community, accumulated by the reader’s discernment of meanings inherent in the composite scheme, as well as the discovery of parallels or recurrent themes (*Modern American* 196). In general, the stories in *Uhuru Street* may be divided into three thematic categories, all concerned with the creation and preservation of the group: stories that explore intracommunity dealings, others that cast light on interracial relations, and those that go beyond the boundaries of *Uhuru Street* to depict the process of immigration and adaptation to another world.

Uhuru Street celebrates the purity and the preservation of the Indian identity through descriptions of the customs, food, and manners of the group. The unity of the ethnic assemblage is emphasized by the clear boundaries established. The child narrators learn the norms of the community, the basis upon which the South Asians — Muslims, Hindus, and Goans — share some assumptions of life and live according to established codes. Portraits of characters outside the group stress the invisible borders maintained by a community that decides who belongs and who does not. The identity of the Indian inhabitants is a permanent collective construction, as they place each other according to class or native village and introduce themselves by tracing their genealogies: “She began by giving him her history. She told him which family she was born in, which she had married into, how

she had raised her kids when our father died. Common relations were discovered between our families" (75).

For the South Asians in Africa, the sustaining of the communal cocoon becomes a strategy for survival in a land that is not theirs. Their Indianness is kept alive by front-bench afternoon gossip and the preservation of traditions and world-views. The idea of *kismet*, for instance, is a repeated motif: "birth, marriage, and death were preordained, as [Mother] often said. You had many choices in life: but not with these three" (25-26). This system of beliefs organizes the characters' possibilities and manners of understanding the world and their places in it, establishing the complex social sphere of Uhuru Street. Significantly, it affects the narrative trajectory in such a way that Vassanji presents bifocal images of private dramas within communal crises (Malak 280). Several stories emphasize the preferred isolation of a group as well as its inner divisions. Every subgroup generally keeps its boundaries closed to the other Indian ethnicities: "the Pereras were Goans and their affairs of little interest to the rest of us" (20). Loyalty to one's ethnic group is evidenced over and over again, drawing attention to the differences in perception even within the South Asian community. This is sharply dramatized in the contrasting reactions of the boy narrator and the Goan Alzira towards Tembo-mbili, "one of Dar's several crazies, a small, thin, Goan man," when the man is almost beaten up by a mob but is rescued by Alzira's brother.

The stories that centre on the Indians cover the magnitude of life experiences, from family crises to the celebration of festivals, from the discovery of the mysteries of life to the cruelty of poverty, all having Uhuru Street as their centre point. The range of styles and themes in the different stories signals the limitless permutation of experience. Tone varies, and with each story there is a new revelation of the intricacies of human behavior. For the students returned from London for holidays, Uhuru Street became "a stage . . . and we would strut up and down its dusty pavements parading overseas fashions, our newly acquired ways" (104). But the street is destined to be more than merely a transitory aspect of their lives, as the narrator of "The London-returned" discovers when he falls in love one summer:

Kismet, our elders called it. You could walk to the end of the world and not find the right partner, they told you, until your kismet opened up for you. And when it did, as surely and beautifully as a flower, no amount of reason could dissuade you from your choice. In our case it sought to bridge our two worlds. And where else should it strike but on Independence Avenue where these two worlds met.
(106)

Ethnic diversity is a major constituent of the space in which the action transpires, and the problematic negotiation of transcultural dealings becomes a recurring theme in the cycle. Vassanji's characters — whether in Africa, Europe, or North America — are hounded and haunted by racism, real or perceived; it hinders their progress and cripples their emotional and intellectual growth, making them give *survival* an exceptional priority in their lives (Malak 280). Interracial relationships, the second principal category of thematic development in the narrative, form a vital part of the dynamics of *Uhuru Street*. Amin Malak claims that the appeal of Vassanji's work resides in its ironic ridicule of the claim of ethnic or religious purists: half-castes, mixed ancestries, syncretic ideologies and beliefs, and cross-cultural relationships or marriages preoccupy his narrative with varying degrees of prominence (281). In "For a Shilling," the narrator's description of the population of his street, "[t]he crazy world of our daily associations — of Arabs, Africans, Asians and assorted half-castes" (35), illustrates the diversity as well as its correspondent privileging and problems. The cultural implications of race are the principal categories of judgment in the stories, constructing the social space within which the characters live. Skin colour, language, and stereotypical images of the other govern the establishment of relationships in an implicitly designed manner. As the Indian narrator of the first story affirms, "We all have a name here. They think I don't know they call me 'Black.' Because I'm dark, almost an African. They have to give me a name, and what better name than something so obvious. Black" (2). Nonetheless, time confirms the transient nature of this criterion. Europeans, remnants of an imperial age, appear superior; the Africans are beneath the Indians in pre-independence Tanzania, although the roles are reversed after

independence. This role-reversal, enacted in several stories, further suggests the inevitability of the departure of the Indians from Tanzania.

The characters' obsession with things European attests to the pervasiveness of their colonial mentality. In "Alzira," the narrator's mother closely observes white women in order to imitate the fashions from the West: "Any European woman who chanced by on our street was the subject of Mother's deepest scrutiny, as she watched out for new patterns" (21). Hussein is called "German" by the neighborhood boys because he says, he can speak German. I've heard him say two things, "Mein Herr," and "Mein Gott," which I presume are German. He was still a youth when the Germans were here, and when he's in the mood he can spin quite a yarn about those times. (2-3) The establishment of racial genealogy, "pedigrees in question" (60), becomes an engrossing concern. "English Lessons" illustrates this through speculations on the origin of Mr. Stuart, the assistant headmaster: "He looked neither European nor Asian. He sounded English, but not quite. The conclusion was that he was a Eurasian, perhaps even a camouflaged Goan" (59). Stuart himself mocks the Indian teachers for their lack of civility, and shows his distaste for Fletcher, "one of the new expatriate teachers from England, scruffy and eccentric" (60). Retribution will come in the form of his pain when the students discover the truth about his home life, forcing him to leave the school.

In general, the stories outline negative aspects or difficulties in the various interracial associations presented. Those that centre on racism evoke a closed world and tend to have troubled, indeterminate endings. Though relationships of dependence may be established, boundaries are kept clear, never to be trespassed. This is why Ali, the servant, is dismissed in the eponymous story. The boy's crime is not, ultimately, spying on the narrator's older sister as she showers, but his confident declaration "I will marry her" (19); the inadmissibility of this ambition is a metaphor for the wedge that separates the South Asians from the Africans of Uhuru Street. Interracial marriages are inconceivable, and an Indian mother defends this posture before a daughter in love with an African: "What do you know of him? . . . With an Asian Man, even if he's evil, you know what to

expect. But with *him?*" (87). This emblematic statement stresses ignorance about the other as the principal force in the uneasy alliance between the two groups. The ambivalent role of Indians in Africa is brought out clearly in "The Driver." Idi, the African driver, is upset about having to "urinate against the stained, yellow back wall" (52) because his Indian employer's wife forbids him to use the household toilet: "Wait, he thought then, smarting from the insult. We'll have our day" (52). His personal revenge is a simple matter of switching the succulent temple offering with the miserly portion meant for his employer's sister. A more harrowing revenge is exacted in the ironically titled "What Good Times We Had," as an African bank clerk avenges a racial insult through the brutal rape and murder of a Canada-bound Indian woman. In her last tragic moments, the woman revises the relationships she has had with Africans, revealing that she has understood nothing of their lives, feelings, or dreams:

And she thought of all the black men she had presided over almost all her thirty-seven years with scorn. The houseboys, the tailors, the customers, the hawkers, who came with the dawn, subservient, and disappeared into the night. Who no more belonged to her community of men and women than the flies on the walls. . . . Was this revenge, or plain avarice? (95)

Vassanji offers a positive vision of contact between Indians and Africans in the promising "Breaking Loose." The attraction between Yasmin and the African professor Akoto is an analogy of the limits of ethnicity and authenticity in a pluralistic society: "He had a theory about African literature. 'It is at present digging up the roots,' he said. And that's what he was trying to do. Dig. 'So you can understand my obsessions with authenticity. Even my name is a burden, an imposition'" (85). This challenges her to find out more about her own ethnic past:

India was not just the past, or the community, or even the jealous communities of Dar. India was a continent, a civilisation, a political entity in the world. Only recently had it emerged from a long struggle for independence. During the holidays Yasmin discovered her world. She read avidly about India, quizzed her father about it. India came as a revelation. Here in Africa she was an Asian, an Indian. Yet she had been a stranger to even the most recent Indian history. (88)

The discovery of her unique cultural position opens up possibilities: The world seemed a smaller place when she went back to the University. Smaller but exciting; teeming with people struggling, fighting, loving; surviving. And she was one of those people. People, bound by their own histories and traditions, seemed to her like puppets tied to strings: but then a new mutant broke loose, an event occurred, and lives changed, the world changed. She was, she decided, a new mutant. (88) Knowledge of her cultural past offers Yasmin the possibility of manipulating her place in the world, choosing her position, to "break away from tribalism" (90), enacted primarily in the decision to enter into a relationship with Akoto, in opposition to familial and cultural norms.

The presentation of the immigrant's world is the third thematic component of the cycle. The setting of the world of the African Indians never remains closed, as they look back to India for cultural affirmation, and to Europe or North America for economic prosperity and an educational future. Cultural influence from the outside is evident from the first stories, and *Uhuru Street* is depicted as a crossroads of influences. The servant boy in "Ali" tells the young narrator stories from both tribal legend and Western comic books: tales of zebras and hyenas and enactments of Shane and Roy Rogers, illustrated with a "charcoal full-length sketch of the cowboy in full regalia" (16). Various characters study abroad, and the immigration of many others is almost an inevitability. Malak has termed "ambivalent affiliation" this indefiniteness observed and understandable in Vassanji's characters: The instability of double migration — hopping continents, trading cultures, and negotiating marginality — has prevented them from establishing roots. . . . It is not that the immigrant or the exile does not desire affiliation, but often he or she desires it on convenient terms; and even then the sociopsychic situation is such that he or she cannot fully, firmly belong. Neither does such an equivocation represent arrogance or cowardice, but rather a forced phenomenon of human reality. (280) As such, many of the stories imply that the world in which the characters live is doomed to end, even as the narrators highlight utopic aspects of life.

At the seashore we drink coconut water, the old man buys peanuts, and we stroll for a while watching kids playing in the sand, boats bobbing up and down on the water, steamers coming into or leaving the harbour. We wave at the passengers when they wave at us and we wonder from what world beyond they could be coming, what country the ship's flag represents. (8)

"Refugee," for instance, presents a synoptic report on the violent conditions after independence, implying the need to flee from the horror:

Now there were daily queues for bread and sugar; milk came in packets from the new factory, diluted, sometimes sour. There were rumors that boys would be recruited to fight Idi Amin, the tyrant to the north. And others that Amin would send planes to bomb Dar The body of an Asian woman had been found on the beach, mutilated, hanging from a tree. Another, an elderly widow, had been hacked to death by robbers in her flat. (122)

In "What Good Times We Had" the emigrating protagonist, before her murder, ironically contemplates the wretched fate of the Asian community in Africa: "Life wasn't easy where she soon would be [Canada] but it couldn't be so bad. There was a price for everything here. And after all that, there was no peace to be had even at night time for fear of robbers. They lived on the edge, not knowing if they would be pushed off the precipice the next day-or if the hand of providence would lift them up and transport them to safety" (93). There are many accounts of departures from Uhuru Street for diverse reasons. "Refugee" and "Leaving" point to separation from the starting point as a requisite component of life, moments characterized by hope for new beginnings.

Life changes for those who leave Dar es Salaam. Geographical distance alters perceptions and modifies attitudes. The stories that tell of immigrant lives emphasize the need to revalidate and accept, or reject, what had been learned at home. The immigrant students in "The London-returned" quickly realize "how frail our defences, how easily cast aside when the time comes. Nothing could have been more natural. Yet nothing could have shocked more, caused greater pain, in a different setting. How easy it was to judge and condemn from there. Yet

no sooner were you here than a layer of righteousness peeled down from your being" (114). Transmitted values must be analyzed, promises compromised, traditions lived against odds. Nothing stays the same. But physical separation does not imply detachment from the past. This story describes the fate of immigrants condemned to re-create their beginnings wherever they are. A superficial openness to others is the moving force in the "thin and marginal world in Toronto" where the narrator and Amina live, "[b]arely within a community whose approval we craved, by whose standards we judged ourselves the élite; the chic and educated. Our friends we counted on our fingers-and we proudly numbered Europeans, Asians, North Americans. Friends to talk about, not bring together; points on our social achievement score" (111). But life on the margins is no life at all, the characters seem to imply. And the only place they belong in is a street across the sea. Amina's survival instinct leads her to find a solution: "She's back in the bosom of Uhuru Street. Or rather the companionship that's moved up Uhuru Street and into the suburban developments of Toronto. . . . And it bloomed once more, that old comradeship of Uhuru Street with Amina at the centre — first helping them to settle and then being with them just like old times. Slowly, Toronto, their Toronto became like Dar, and I was out of it" (112).

Since short story cycles do not usually require the type of ending expected of a traditional novel, its typical concluding section tends to simply round off the themes, symbolism, and whatever patterned action the cycle possesses. In this manner, through the drawing together of the themes, motifs, and symbols, the author places the finishing touches on the portrait being created. While the fusion of the stories in the reader's imagination generally creates community, the actual fact of the stories' independence, their individual closure and completion, may also suggest the incapacity to form community. The representation of discrete events and ideas multiply meanings to the point that their external ambivalence becomes an outward sign of internal displacement. The short story cycle, therefore, is unique also for the way in which it often reflects "the *failure* of place and character to unify a work that remains tantalizingly whole yet

fundamentally suspicious of completeness" (Lynch 96). Therefore, the concluding stories of cycles present the most serious challenges to readers and critics, as they bring to fulfillment the recurrent patterns of the cycle, frequently reintroducing many of the major characters and central images, restating the thematic concerns of the preceding stories. Many of these are called "return stories" and their concern is the passage of time, change and identity (Lynch 98).

The narrator of "The London-returned" also recounts the last story, a physical returning to Uhuru Street, suggesting the possibility of a cyclical nature to migration. This character has been portrayed a kind of perpetual holiday visitor to the city, as most of his life has been lived in boarding school in England. Ironically, at the end, he returns to Dar es Salaam when everybody has left. "All Worlds Are Possible Now" tells of his return and his despair, his ritual of reclaiming, and his bitter discovery that the only thing for him to recover is the street, without the people (Kanaganayakam 34). His attempts to make a new life for himself here are shadowed by his ambivalent motivations: "I returned, I suppose, because I always returned, ever since those student days I spent abroad. But a broken home also pushed me out as did concern for a palsied father spending his last years alone. There was an element of escape in my return as there was once in my leaving" (130).

The concluding story is an exposition of the loss of hope, of the emptiness in Uhuru Street, "this once beloved street that looks so narrow and small now" (131), where "the ships that pass here no longer carry portents of faraway, impossible worlds" (130). The protagonist-narrator, absorbed in an exercise of definition of home, finds that his steps have led him back to where everything began. His conversations with the various characters reveal a generalized obsession with that theme: Uhuru Street has been home for many lost souls, the only home they had known, in spite of Lateef's jocular proclamation that "the whole world is our home. It's a global village" (135). Distance heightens the sense of rootlessness, the thrill of travel and adventure is fleeting: "Yes, when it comes down to it, there is only a plain longing for home, a permanence" (139). The ending of this

story appears to belie the promising title, when the narrator, with a vanquished air, can only conclude: "my game is up. For me now the permanence of this weekly ritual, this breathless empty reclamation of the streets instead" (141). His destiny is to roam the street in a futile attempt to find himself, or his place.

Several elements ultimately unify the diverse stories of *Uhuru Street*. History, the moving force in the creation and establishment of place and relationships, clearly plays a major role in the cycle. Bardolph suggests that "the connection between the stories is established through the historical events that increasingly shape people's destinies: Independence, the involvement of some Asians in the new socialist government of Tanzania, the first fears triggered by events in Uganda, the exodus" (84). She further claims that the book has a thematic unity because in the apparent stability and innocence of the childish world can be perceived the flaws that will accelerate the break-up and dispersal of the community (88). In spite of the clear relevance of historical circumstances to the collection, the outstanding role of place as the unifying factor of the cycle cannot be disregarded. Uhuru Street is the only element that brings the characters of all the stories together, divided as they are by religion, ethnic origin, language, and political affiliation. It remains a superficial unity for the characters do not — cannot — form a community. The forces that separate them — historical circumstances, cultural specificities, and political changes — are ultimately stronger than that which unites, that is, place. The tenuous establishment of the community of Uhuru Street, with its unwritten laws of alienating boundaries, is utterly destroyed in the final story. The significance of *Uhuru Street* arises from its emphasis on the inevitable fragmentation brought about by the experiences of colonization and immigration, a break that cannot be mended. Privileging place is not valid for all experiences, it seems, but it nonetheless remains the only surviving link to a usable past.

Vassanji's short story cycle, centring on the creation of place as starting point to the negotiation of identity and community, points to the need to reevaluate the touchstones for these postcolonial themes through literature. The role of the writer becomes doubly important when, as in this case, the community

has been scattered by history. As Vassanji explains, “the writer must write if only to recreate that lost world — for whatever reason — which soon exists nowhere but in his memory” (“Postcolonial Writer” 66-67). The writer, he implies, must be conscious of his role

as a preserver 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 present. To borrow an image from physics, he creates a field space — of words, images and landscapes — in which to work with, and install the present. (63)

This short story cycle, as a discourse on postcolonial self-definition through recollections of a colonized past and the immigrant experience, demonstrates the strong collective impulse that has characterized much ethnic fiction. Using the paradigms of storytelling to embody the drama of home and adaptation, M. G. Vassanji weaves together the sources of meaning to see if he can ensure the survival of the group, through reflections on the place of beginning and individual experiences of belonging. The writer turns to local roots — family, community, and ethnicity — as sources of personal identity and creative expression. Narratives that articulate individual stories answer questions about self-representation, creating and maintaining community through literary discourse. As Hertha Wong argues, storytelling as an act of self-definition and cultural continuance can be empowering because it helps create community and because stories are all we have to counter the “grand meta-narratives” of history (184). The manner in which Vassanji has appropriated the short story cycle as a metaphor for the fragmentation and multiplicity of ethnic lives is itself an exposition of the between-culture position and the complex process towards self-identification. As such, the impressionistic perspective and fragmentation of place and people emphasize the subjectivity of experience and understanding. The subsequent narrative, a reflection of a tendency towards a hybrid form, provides enriching glimpses of a society in the process of transformation and growth.

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