REFUGEE, MIGRATION, DIASPORA

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Lecture 53

Lecture 53: Third Space and Hybridity in M. G. Vassanji's No New Land

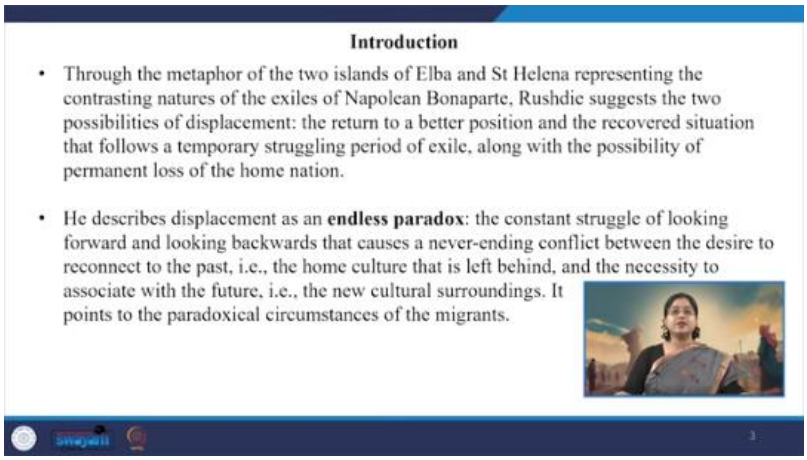
Thank you. Good morning and welcome back to the lecture series on Refugees, Migration, and Diaspora. So, today we are going to take up a new topic, a new novel, No New Land by M.G. Vassanji, and we will study No New Land through the lens of third space and hybridity. So, in The Satanic Verses, Salman Rushdie says the following:

Exile is a dream of a glorious return. Exile is a vision of revolution. Elba, not St. Helena. It is an endless paradox, looking forward but always looking back.

The exile is a ball hurled high into the air. This above quote by Indian-British author Salman Rushdie explains the underpinnings of displacement in terms of migration and diaspora. Rushdie here sheds light on the unanticipated psychological strife and emotional experiences of an individual who has been displaced from the place of his or her origin. So, he uses various metaphors in this quote, as we can see, which connect with the hopes and repercussions related to migration. The metaphor of a dream of a glorious return suggests an optimistic attitude and a hopefulness of returning to one's native land with improved conditions where difficulties have been overcome which had once caused this displacement.

So at the end of the day, at the back of one's mind, in a displaced person's mind, there is this hope, this optimism that the difficulties of their homeland are resolved and that they are able to go back and reclaim their their former life, their former life as a native. Through the metaphor of the two islands, Elba and St. Helena, representing the contrasting natures of Napoleon Bonaparte's exiles, Rushdie suggests that the two possibilities of displacement exist. On one hand, the return to a better position and a recovered situation, which follows a temporary struggling period of exile. And on the other, there is the possibility of permanent loss of the home nation where

one can never return again because the problem becomes deeper and deeper. The problem becomes so much worse that there is no question of going back and reclaiming one's belonging in the nation state, in their home nation. So the problem becomes so much bigger, so much worse with time that there is no question of reclaiming one's native identity, one's belonging in the home nation. Rushdie describes displacement as an endless paradox. There is this constant struggle of looking forward and yet looking backward, which causes a never-ending conflict between the desire to reconnect to the past—the home culture left behind—and the pragmatic necessity to associate with the future or the new cultural surroundings, the host land.



So, this kind of tug-of-war between the home and host identity points to the paradoxical circumstances that define an immigrant's experience. Further, Rushdie compares displacement to the situation of hurling a ball high into the air, which results in a loss of control over it, and this represents the uncertainty and unpredictability of an immigrant's situation. After a migrant has reached the host nation with hopes for better living conditions than those experienced back in her homeland, the future, however, remains

blurry and unforeseeable due to various external factors that are yet to decide their conditions of living, their experience in the host nation.

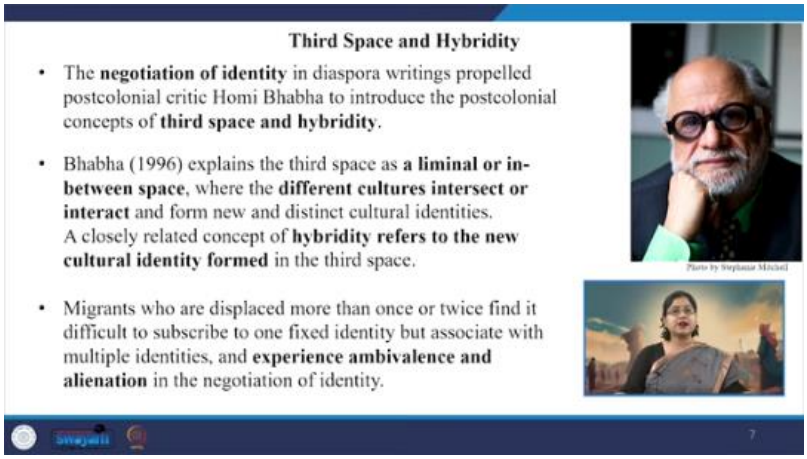
So, although people actually land in a new nation with plenty of hopes and expectations, the future still seems blurry and unforeseeable. It takes some time to settle, adjust, and understand how their future is going to look in the new nation, the host nation. Displacement of people from their native place to a distant new place has occurred since ancient times due to several factors, including political or religious persecution, economic factors, and natural calamities. All of these factors result in the emergence of many diasporas around the world. According to Stuart Hall, a proponent and founding figure of cultural studies, I quote Hall here: 'Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew through transformation and difference,' unquote.

Post-colonial conditions created socio-political circumstances for some communities, exposing them to double displacement from their native land. For instance, we can discuss the displacement of Indians from Africa after Africa's independence. So, displacement leads people to utter dissolution, causing a sense of unbelonging, negotiation of change or identity crisis, and hence a denial or even suppression of a particular identity, resulting in immigrants assuming multiple identities. There cannot be just one pure identity that a person facing displacement or further double displacement can possess.

So, such a person will always be defined through a host of influences or identities that shape him or her, right? The distress caused by the negotiation of identity and uprootedness is visible in the accounts written by authors who have been displaced not once but multiple times, as we call it double displacement from their native land. So, Amin Malik in 1993 observes, I quote Malik: 'One of the most crucial questions that the post-colonial or third-world writer faces today involves the demanding affiliations that manifest themselves at emotional, cultural, ethnic, linguistic, or political levels,' unquote. Malik further asserts that readers can easily point out the shifting boundaries of in-betweenness in the works of Canadian authors whose roots are in some third-world country. This includes Austin Clarke, Michael Ondaatje, Neil Bissoondath, Rohinton Mistry, as well as M.G.

Vassanji. Now, coming to the negotiation of identity in diaspora writings, one sees that post-colonial critic Homi Bhabha introduces concepts—post-colonial concepts such as

the third space and hybridity—which directly speak to the immigrants' experience. and the immigrant identity. Bhabha, in 1996, explains the third space as a liminal or in-between space where different cultures intersect or interact and form new and distinct cultural identities. A closely related concept, hybridity, refers to the new cultural identity that is formed



in the third space. So, the third space becomes a site for infinite possibilities, unfolding through the meeting of different cultures and different practices. Migrants who are displaced more than once or twice find it difficult to subscribe to one fixed identity, as I have mentioned earlier. So, they associate with multiple identities and experience ambivalence and alienation in the negotiation of their identity.

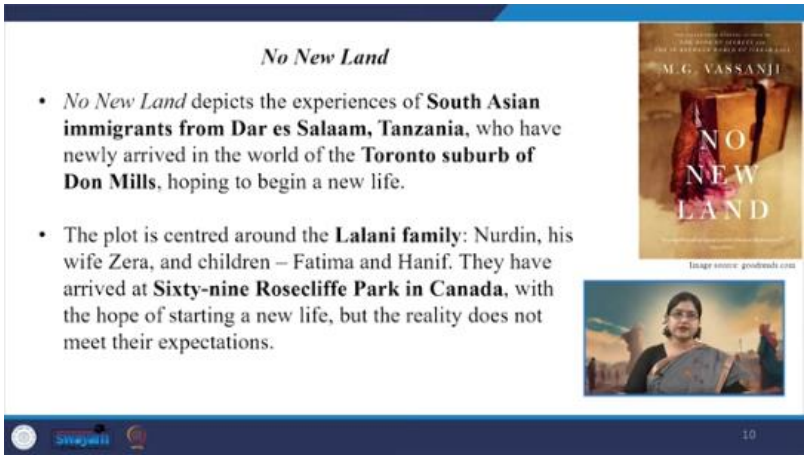
Moyez Ghulamhussein Vassanji was born in Nairobi, Kenya, to Indian immigrant parents, and he was raised in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, and later resettled in Toronto, Canada. So, we see this person's journey across so many places. Born in Nairobi, Kenya, and then raised in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania.

Later, he resettled in Toronto, Canada. M.G. Vassanji is notable for writing 10 novels, 3 collections of short stories, 2 travel memoirs, and a biography. He is a towering literary figure of the 20th century and published his first novel, The Gunny Sack, in 1989, which earned him prestigious literary prizes, including the Commonwealth First Book Prize. Then, his magnum opus arrived in 1991: No New Land.

His novels primarily explore the lives of transplanted and dislocated Asians and their experiences of cultural and racial discrimination. So, Vassanji's first novel, The Gunny Sack, paved the way for his second novel, No New Land. No New Land begins where The Gunny Sack left off, despite featuring a fresh cast of characters. Like his other

novels, No New Land also presents his autobiographical accounts and perspectives. His first novel recounts the Asian arrival in East Africa and their struggle to claim a new home amid de-centering experiences, followed by their final exodus from East Africa.

Thus, his work serves as a testimonial document that records the witness and experience of Asians from their arrival until their final exodus from East Africa. No New Land depicts the experiences of South Asian immigrants from Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, who have newly arrived in the Toronto suburb of Don Mills, hoping to begin a new life. This plot centers around the Lalani family. The characters of Noordin, his wife Zera, and their children Fatima and Hanif comprise the Lalani family.

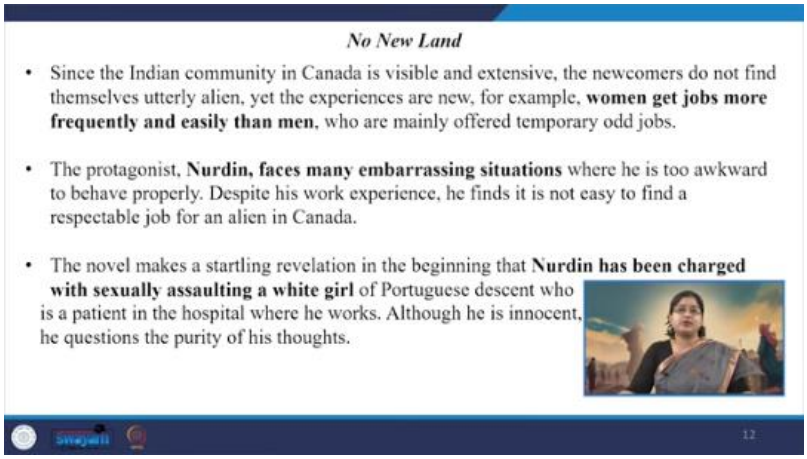


They have arrived at 69 Rosecliffe Park in Canada with the hope of starting a new life. However, the reality does not meet their expectations of the land. So, this is an excerpt from the novel No New Land. I quote, 'We are but creatures of our origins, and however stalwartly we march forward, paving new roads, seeking new worlds, the ghosts from our past stand not far behind and are not easily shaken off,' unquote. The concluding lines of the first chapter from No New Land are pervaded by a sharpened sense of history—a history that almost pierces an individual in terms of the realization it provokes. It remarks on the need, it is a commentary on the need to make peace with the past in order to move ahead.

If the past looms too prominently over the present, it's difficult to move ahead smoothly. So, we see in the case of the Lalani family, the values that they thought of as morality and community binding back in their Asian African community and considered an integral part of their existence went on to play a great influence as they were resettled in Canada. While these values did not match any Canadian standard, they nevertheless etched a familiar niche within their local existence. So, through these community-binding values,

through these moral standards that they inherited from their Asian African community, they are able to etch an identity within their 69 Rosecliffe Park residence. And this Rosecliffe Park residence where the Lalanis live becomes a microcosm carrying their Dar es Salaam's Tanzanian culture.

Since the Indian community in Canada is visible and extensive, the newcomers do not really have to find themselves utterly alien, and yet the experiences are new. For example, women get jobs more frequently and easily compared to men, because men are mainly offered temporary odd jobs. This is something characteristic of the multicultural Canadian society vis-à-vis its workforce or its work scenario.



Now, the protagonist Noordin faces many embarrassing situations where he is too awkward to behave properly. Despite his work experience, Noordin finds it is not very easy to find a respectable job as an outsider or an alien in Canada. The novel makes a startling or very striking revelation toward the beginning, where Noordin has been charged with sexually assaulting a white girl of Portuguese origin, who happens to be a patient in the hospital where he works. We know as readers that he is innocent. However, he himself questions the purity of his own thoughts.

Noordin tries to find guilt in his own behavior, which starts with his eating pork. So, he gets so frustrated and demoralized, he starts suspecting his own intentions, and it results in him experimenting with new things, such as starting to eat pork, which is prohibited in his religion, and also drinking beer and looking lewdly at women. as well as visiting an old acquaintance called Sushila. All these things actually make him further depressed, and he is always haunted by his old-world values.

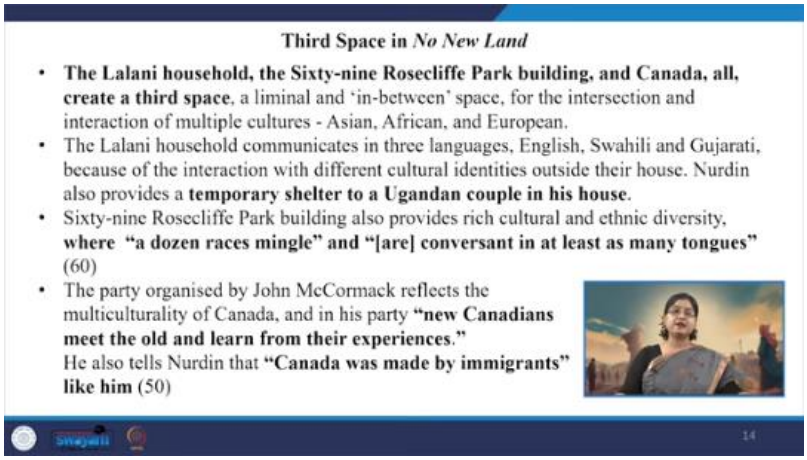
He feels marginalized even within his own family, as his children are too ambitious and they are indifferent and ashamed of his profession. Whereas his own wife is wedded to religion, she is very austere and religiously inclined, and she also scorns his physical cohabitation. So, this man is socially scandalized within the familial domain. He is marginalized, cornered. And so, the narrative conjoins various subplots, which include Shamsu Noordin's brother and his involvement in the black market.

and then the arrival of missionary in Canada. Further we have the character of Ismail getting crippled and rejoicing at a new status as an artist but he also becomes a victim of racism, and further the character of Jamal who experiences upward mobility from being a samosa supplier to entering the Ontario bar. And all these experiences, all these different shades of experiences by the different characters highlight the struggles of the immigrants or the outsiders once they land in Canada. It closes with Jamal's persuasion of the white Portuguese girl to revoke her statement and close the case against Noordin.

The Lalani household, the 69 Rosecliffe Park building and Canada, all of these, you know, spaces, create or amount to a third space, a liminal and in-between space, which becomes a thriving ground for intersection and interaction of multiple cultures, the Asian, African and European cultures or elements mixed in. So the Lalani household communicates in three different languages, English, Swahili and Gujarati. So we see that the English is picked up from their contact with European culture or the Canadian culture. Swahili has been picked up

from their African contact and then Gujarati is connecting to their Indian roots. So, their proficiency in different languages point to their interaction with different cultural identities outside their house. So Nurdin also provides a temporary shelter to a Ugandan couple in his house. 69 Rosecliffe Park building also provides rich cultural and ethnic diversity, where a dozen races mingle and are conversant in at least as many tongues. So, we see a completely hybrid culture thriving in this locality.

The party organized by John McCormack, for example, reflects the multiculturalism of Canada, and in his party, new Canadians meet the old and learn from their experiences. McCormack also tells Nurdin that Canada was built by immigrants like him. So, hybridity, which is a consequence or an upshot of the third space, is the formation of new and unique cultural forms due to the blending of distinct cultural elements. So, distinct cultural elements, the pure cultural elements, blend to form a third space.



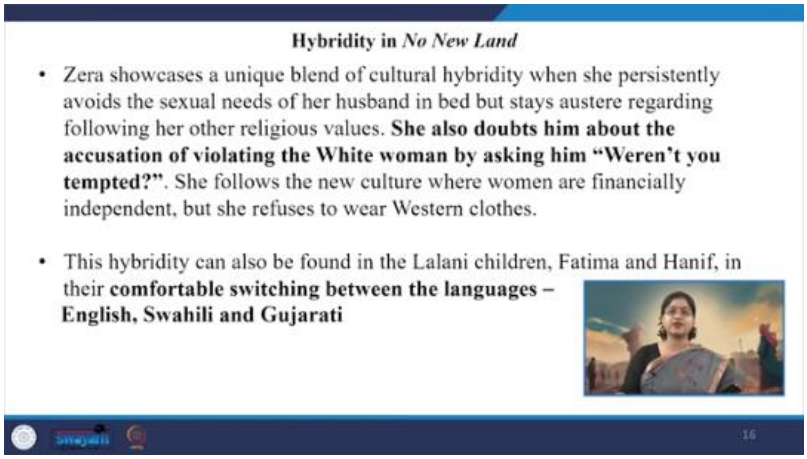
All the immigrants experience a cultural transformation, but it manifests diversely in their hybrid identities. To cite an instance, Nurdin and Zera, the husband and wife from the Lalani household, both migrate from Africa and come to live in Canada, and yet the cultural hybridity affects them in different ways. In Canada, Nurdin acquires a new blend in his cultural values, and he begins to eat pork, drink alcohol, and he lewdly watches Canadian women. On the other hand, his wife Zera shifts her perspective in the new society by starting to work, and she is the one who provides for the family. The new financial freedom puts her at the center of the family.

She becomes the breadwinner and someone who is, literally, you know, wearing the pants in the family. But unlike Nurdin, who has become a marginalized member and who has, in a way, drifted from the religious values of Islam, Zera enjoys her newfound freedom in Canada. However, she remains strictly adhered to her ethnic and religious identity. Zera showcases a unique blend of cultural hybridity, where she persistently avoids the sexual needs of her husband. However, she stays austere regarding, you know, following her other religious values, although she is not obeying the conjugal demands of her husband.

She is otherwise a religious enthusiast, and she adheres to the religious values very stringently. She also doubts her husband about, you know, the accusation that he has faced regarding violating a white woman. She asks Noordin, so she also doubts her husband about the accusation that he faces regarding violating a white woman. And she asks Noordin, weren't you tempted? So, she follows the new culture where women are financially independent.

However, Zera refuses to wear Western clothes. So, she is a symbol of hybridity where she has acquired certain elements of the Canadian culture, but not everything. She does not let all the Western values replace her previous training, her previous knowledge, or

her outlook. This hybridity can also be found in the Lalani children, Fatima and Hanif, where, as I have already said, they are comfortable switching between languages. They are simultaneously speaking in three different languages: English, Swahili, and Gujarati, thereby connecting to three different roots—the European-Canadian culture, the African culture, and the Indian roots.



M.G. Vassanji's works not only vibrantly depict the Canadian multicultural society, but they also rightly present the experiences of double migration that the South Asian characters face. According to Elspeth Cameron, his fiction could therefore also be said to be Canadian fiction par excellence. So, they are the typified avatars of Canadian fiction.

They have all the essential, quintessential elements of Canadian fiction and project Canada as the home country of multiculturalism. Vassanji's characters introduce their past stories, and they negotiate the changes, the journeys, and the flux or shifts in identities that they undergo, hence complicating their clear-cut identities. Displaced people can hardly claim any clear-cut identity. They are constantly negotiating with changes and identity flux. So, in No New Land, the Asian African immigrants in Canada are shown as constantly playing around with the sense and status of belonging to another continent, another country, and culture to which they had to migrate once more.

So, they had, in the first place, migrated from India to Africa and then further they have landed up in Canada. So, this shift, this constant negotiation with one's sense of belonging, one's status of belonging, becomes the core of discussion, becomes the germ of what defines Vassanji's work No New Land. So, double displacement in Canadian society creates a third space for the characters, and they are defined by hybrid and ambivalent identities, displaying very complex, layered, and nuanced identities. So, with this, we come to the end of our lecture here today.

Let us meet with a new topic and another round of discussions in our next lecture. Thank you.