

Cultural Survival in Exile: Diaspora and Masculinity in Vassanji's *No New Land*

Anju J

Department of English and Foreign Languages, College of Engineering and Technology, SRM Institute of Science and Technology, Kattankulathur Campus, 603203, Tamil Nadu, India

P. Tamilarasan

Department of English and Foreign Languages, College of Engineering and Technology, SRM Institute of Science and Technology, Kattankulathur Campus, 603203, Tamil Nadu, India

Abstract—Gender, has an impact on virtually every facet of our lives. A person's gender is an essential component of their complete identity. Some men do not subscribe to the qualities and features of hegemonic masculinity, yet, it is the cultural and institutional practices that can exercise their effect on these men. Given that masculinity plays a significant role in the lives of men and its impact on women and children. This paper investigates how masculinity is portrayed in Vassanji's novel *No New Land* and examines how immigration to foreign places either promotes or challenges men's sense of masculinity. An examination of the representation of significant male figures in Vassanji's *No New Land* provides views of two distinct civilizations and permits a transnational and transcultural comparison of the consequences of masculinity on men who migrate to various cultures. Given that gender studies often overlook the challenges men face compared to those faced by women under patriarchy, this study adds to the growing body of research highlighting the issues men encounter under patriarchy.

Index Terms—diaspora, masculinity, identity, transcultural, victim

I. INTRODUCTION

“Literary works especially the genre of novels highlight certain thoughts, ideas, and issues related to the relationships of human beings” (Kayani et al., 2023). In his book *No New Land*, M. G. Vassanji emphasizes that “We are but creatures of our origins, and however stalwartly we march forward, paving new roads, seeking new worlds, the ghosts from our pasts stand not far behind and are not easily shaken off” (Vassanji, 1991, p. 9). The purpose of this paper is to investigate the portrayal of masculinity in Vassanji's *No New Land* by examining the portrayal of significant male characters Nurdin, Jamal, and Nanji; exploring the narrative of migration which intensifies the pressure for adaptation, and investing the ways these male characters deal with the challenges or reinforcements to their masculinity. The inspiration for this research is that we are animals of our past, and the ghosts of our past are not far behind. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to examine how men cope with the ghosts of their past in connection to their masculine socialization. Specifically, it examines how their encounters with different forms of masculinity in a new cultural environment either support or challenge their existing conception of what it means to be masculine.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The identification of a person is an essential component of the person's overall identity. Gender is considered to be one of the important components of an individual's identity because it influences almost every facet of a person's life. The identity formation of all societies is based on models that have been established around what it means to be male or female (Ramphela, 1997). This is a simple way of capturing the essence of the situation. Linda Lindsey, in the same vein, argues in *Gender Roles: A Sociological Perspective* that learned through ascription, the female or male position is a master status in the sense that it is one which will influence nearly every facet of our existence (Lindsey, 1997). Lindsey writes that “the status of female or male is a master status” (Lindsey, 1997). Because gender is a social construction, and because every society has its own set of social expectations regarding masculinity and femininity, one begins to wonder what migration does to a person's sense of masculinity and femininity. Coleman mention that “when men emigrate, they take a familiar, though not necessarily unified, set of masculine practices with them; when they immigrate, they encounter a second, less familiar set of masculine practices. Migration thus involves a process of cross-cultural refraction” (Coleman, 1998, p. 3). The purpose of this study is to investigate how men in the African diaspora experience their masculinity being challenged or strengthened. This paper relies on the research that Daniel Coleman has conducted on men and migration.

It is impossible to exaggerate the significance of a person's gender in their lives. Masculinity is framed as a collection of virtues and traits tied to traditional male roles and the celebration of strength (Ojaide, 2010). These concept, which

are sometimes associated with the virtues of a warrior, are not only an essential component of the culture but they are also regarded by the people as conforming to the predetermined standards of behaviour and conduct as well as the actions of men” (Ojaide, 2010). Hegemonic masculinity is another name for these predetermined standards of conduct that have been created. In spite of the fact that not all men consciously agree with the concept of hegemonic masculinity, it is strongly rooted in patriarchy and exerts its influence through cultural and institutional practices at the same time. As a result, it encourages aggressiveness, muscular power, and resilience. It is highlighted how patriarchal structures enforce harmful expectations on men, pointing out:

Patriarchy therefore affects men as much as women. Men are oppressed and isolated by the models to which they are expected to conform. Men struggle to prove themselves to be men and the penalties for failing to do so are considerable. They are teased, isolated and forced into constant competition in drinking, sport, womanizing and risk-taking behaviours. Masculine identities often expect men to curtail their lifestyles in order to conform. Gender studies have not always recognized the damage done to men under patriarchy. (Harrison, 2008, p. 29)

In an effort to combat negative gender conceptions, gender studies have frequently placed more emphasis on the harm that is inflicted on women as a result of patriarchy. This study addresses this gap by examining how patriarchal structures affect men. Gender studies only provide a small amount of respect for the harm that is inflicted upon men. In addition, as Tommy Curry points out, Black masculinity is not without its conflicts, and it has been seen by certain individuals as a desire to attain white masculinity. This is a myth that is still being maintained by many academics, who continue to deny the existence of multiple masculinities among Black men (Curry, 2017).

III. METHODOLOGY

The novel was chosen because it provides insights into the cultures of Tanzania and Canada, as well as the opportunity to compare the masculinities of the two nations and the ways in which immigration to a new country can either challenge or support masculinity. While Vassanji’s novel does not represent all stories related to immigration, this paper aims to inspire further exploration into how immigration impacts masculinity and the ways in which men are impacted by these experiences. “A significant portion of Canadian multicultural literature deals with the process of achieving selfhood for the between world subject,” Rocio Davis says. “This is an important feature of Canadian literature.” The majority of the authors, through their works of fiction, raise the topic of what constitutes identity and what constitutes community, therefore indicating how geographical, ethnic, political, and cultural composition and disparities act as signifying components of this multifaceted self” (Davis, 1999).

The theory that Judith Butler developed regarding the performativity of gender will be utilized in this paper. Simone de Beauvoir’s argument that “one is not born a woman, but, rather, becomes one” (Butler, 1999, p. 127) serves as the foundation for Judith Butler’s thesis on the performativity of gender. The argument that gender is perceived to be performative was an effort to demonstrate that we experience to be an internal gender essence is created by a routine set of acts, argued through gendered stylization of the body is presented by Judith Butler in her book titled *Gender Trouble: Feminism and Subversion of Identity* (Butler, 1999). On top of that, she goes on to say that “Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (Butler, 1999, p. 33). There are notions of masculinity and femininity that are contained inside the performance of gender. The theory of Judith Butler is helpful for this paper because it offers an analysis of masculinity in the context of how it is portrayed in two different cultures: Dar es Salaam and Toronto cultural contexts. The expectations that are placed on the male gender in the two cultures are therefore reflected in the way that males are portrayed in both of these civilizations. When it comes to the idea of the performativity of gender, Daniel Coleman (1998) makes the observation that Judith Butler’s theory lends credibility to the cultural and genealogical analysis of masculinities.

“Masculine migrations are about men’s negotiation of social constraints and their innovations within these constraints”. The significance of this research lies in the fact that masculinity studies gained momentum in the 1980s when feminists emphasized the significance of comprehending the various ways in which men experience and enact gender (Adomako Ampofo et al., 2009). How men experience and enact gender in the face of challenges or reinforcements to their gender in new lands is, as Smith-Rosenberg (2011) describes, “performed, not real” in the face of multiple expressions of masculinity from various cultures being represented in the same geographical space. As a result, a great deal more needs to be discovered concerning this topic.

IV. DISCUSSION

A. *Plight of Nurdin*

In the novel *No New Land*, the protagonist, Nurdin, and his wife travel to Canada in search of better opportunities. Before the two of them immigrated to Canada, Nurdin worked for Bata Shoe Company, and Zera was the proprietor of a retail establishment. As a result of the fact that he had a successful career as a salesperson for a shoe company, as well as the fact that he had two children and a wife who, according to the readers, appreciated him and showed affection toward him, Nurdin was content with his life. Consequently, Nurdin always felt a sense of satisfaction when he returned home to his wife and children. As soon as the family arrives in Canada, the readers are informed that the objective of

the family is to ensure that “first the man of the household had to get work befitting his status.” However, despite his best efforts, Nurdin Lalani was unable to secure employment (Vassanji, 1991, p. 43). The unfortunate thing that happened to Nurdin was that within a week of his arrival in Canada, both of his children were already registered in school, and his wife had already found work as a receptionist. Nurdin, the man of the house and the person who had previously been the primary provider for the family found himself in a highly precarious situation as a result of this, he was unable to fulfil his responsibilities. According to the information provided to the readers, Nurdin frequently came home feeling depressed and sank deeper into depression after venturing out in quest of employment. It is due to the consequences that his lack of employment had on his capacity to fulfil his position as the primary provider for his family, as well as the ramifications that this had on his sense of manhood. The readers are informed that by the time Zera returns home from work, Nurdin will be dishevelled and exhausted. This is because he had to go home and wait for the children, clean up the house, do the laundry, and do whatever else needed to be done in the house in order to avoid feeling like he was a useless person. As Nurdin explains, even his glass of water was delivered to him by a servant in Dar, and there was also a servant who picked up the children from school. Unfortunately, this was a circumstance that Nurdin had never been in before. As a result, Nurdin viewed himself as a servant when he was required to do the numerous duties that he had played in Canada to generate some income for his family. It was not uncommon for him to be seen carrying cases on his back, pressing trousers, preparing French fries, and sweeping and mopping floors. As a conclusion, “you could weep” (Vassanji, 1991, p. 89), as Vassanji puts it all together. As a result of Nurdin’s perception of himself as a servant, he was hesitant to descend any further on the ladder of self-esteem. Consequently, Nurdin was dissatisfied with the fact that he was offered a position that required him to wipe tables in a restaurant because he considered this to be a form of servitude. As a result, he was quite insulted when he was provided a mop to clean the floor of the restaurant, and he simply refused to comply with the instructions. According to what is stated in the text, “it seemed to Nurdin that he had come down in self-esteem and expectation, grasping whatever odd job came his way, and becoming a menial in the process” (Vassanji, 1991, p. 88). Nurdin was hesitant to accept any employment that he considered to be beneath his dignity as a man, even though he had acquired the position of a menial labourer. As a result of the fact that the money was satisfactory and the perks were satisfactory, Nurdin decided to accept the position at the Ontario Addiction Centre, despite the fact that the employment did not meet the standards that he had anticipated. Vassanji is quoted as saying that “they would have made him wear Khaki in Dar for such a job” (Vassanji, 1991, p. 122). It is for this reason that he considers it to be an improvement over the same job he had in Dar. Additionally, the favourable working conditions provided a boost to his masculinity, as they improved his financial situation. After Nurdin is hired, Vassanji states, “For Nurdin Lalani, a new life had begun with his job at the Ontario Addiction Center.” This statement is made after Nurdin has been hired. Through this, he had consented to a position in his life, which was not one that he felt he deserved but was nonetheless a position that would suffice. At the very least, he was able to assert that he was employed” (Vassanji, 1991, p. 126). Because this was of such great significance to him, Zera recommends that he tell others that he is a manager at his place of employment because he is in charge of providing supply rooms.

B. Nanji, the Idealist

During their time in Canada, Nurdin and his family come upon Nanji. Nanji, a young man of exceptional intelligence, had been awarded a scholarship to attend a top university in the United States. He was a professor at Woodsworth College, where he taught evening classes. Vassanji states that “it did inflame Nanji sometimes the way he was taken for a laborer and even a shopkeeper” (Vassanji, 1991). This is something that Nanji experienced. Nanji felt this way because, in contrast to the work of a labourer or merchant, he believed that his job allowed him to maintain his male ideals. Nanji returns home feeling numb and depressed after a scenario in which Esmail is attacked while Nanji is present but is unable to assist him. According to what Vassanji has to say about Nanji, “what ached him was his own behavior during the attack because he had not moved or uttered a word to help” (Vassanji, 1991). Because of this, he had the impression that he was a coward. In his perspective, the virile standards of how a man ought to behave were not met by this, which posed a threat to his masculinity because it did not fulfil those ideals. Therefore, Nanji is delighted when Jamal tells him that he urinated on a woman he had slept with because she asked him why “Pakis” like him always come to Canada. This important idea shows that colonial history has generated a racial difference concerning spatial perception (Shabanirad & Dadkhah, 2017). Jamal’s explanation is why Nanji is pleased. The fact that Jamal is not from Pakistan or Asia causes him to react in this manner since he considers it an insult to be referred to as such. It is stated by Vassanji that “he (Nanji) was impressed, not at the exhibition but at the sheer energy and anger expressed” (Vassanji, 1991). Therefore, Nanji had the impression that Jamal was displaying his manhood, which was in contrast to him. This is the reason he found Jamal’s display of masculinity impressive. “Nanji watched Jamal go with a sense of envy eating deep inside because Jamal was going into the world to conquer it,” the narrator says later in the story (Vassanji, 1991). This is a statement that the narrator makes. As a result of this envy and the desire to conquer, readers can see that Nanji considers Jamal to be “a man,” a man who walks with his head held high because he possesses virile attributes and is, therefore, able to conquer. Because of this, Nanji is overjoyed when Jamal and Nasim, Jamal’s wife, visit him at his house later on in the narrative. They are astonished by the fact that he has improved the state of his living quarters. When Jamal informs him, “this is it,” he feels much more like a man than he already does. This moment

marks the beginning of your life” (Vassanji, 1991). Jamal’s statements convey Nanji’s deep-seated desire for him to climb the social ladder and be praised since it gives him a boost to his ego and makes him feel more manly.

C. *Jamal: A Journey of Belonging*

Jamal is another immigrant who, like Nurdin, makes his home in Toronto after fleeing Tanzania. Jamal had previously lived in Tanzania. Back in Dar, he had been working as a lawyer for the government, but he was forced to flee after realizing that there was a conspiracy to take his life. In order to satisfy his early financial requirements, he started his life in Toronto by selling samosas at a convenience store. As a result of his perception that the act of selling samosas was beneath him, he discreetly concealed the samosas within his briefcase. This was the same briefcase that he had previously used to transport government documents in Dar. An experience that he viewed himself as having to suffer until he could climb the social ladder to where he felt he belonged was selling samosas. He regarded himself as needing to endure this ordeal. When Jamal achieves his goal of becoming a lawyer in Toronto, he demonstrates his manhood by separating himself from the residents of Rosecliffe Park. This is done to increase the likelihood that his accomplishment will be recognized by the general public. In light of this, Vassanji informs the audience that Jamal emphasized that “there was a proper distance between a lawyer and a client.” This was a requirement for professional conduct” (Vassanji, 1991). Therefore, to restrict access to him, he established “roadblocks” consisting of his secretary and his wife. His accomplishments as a lawyer were a boost to his masculinity, which he had to flaunt by distancing himself from the same people he used to move with and converse with. His class no longer had the same people he used to socialise and move with.

D. *Confronting Challenges*

It is important to note that the acts and inactions of the three male characters in *No New Land* are significant for these diasporic subjects. This is because being in the diaspora places them in a situation where their masculinity is either tested or strengthened because different cultures have varied ideas of what it is to be masculine. As Jonathan Rollins points out in Asma Sayed’s edited collection of essays on the works of M. G. Vassanji, when the Lalani’s arrive in Canada and are confronted with the harsh reality of low temperatures in Toronto, they go out the following day to buy warm winter clothes, but while they are doing so, they do not throw away the clothes that they brought from Tanzania. The new garments are merely an addition to the ones that they brought with them. As a result, he draws a parallel between the past and the present by representing it as an accumulation of clothing, which ultimately leads to the clothing from the past being fully discarded at a certain time. The concept of identity is often compared to the process of changing one’s outfit (Rollins, 2014). Because people in the diaspora initially arrive with the identity of their history, this is the reason why this analogy holds. In the context of globalization, adaptability to new cultural norms is essential. As Balaji and Thenmozhi (2023) demonstrate, individuals who actively work to transcend language and societal barriers are more likely to succeed. They come to the realization that in order to enjoy their new surroundings and survive in their new environment, they need to unlearn some things from their past while simultaneously learning new things. This realization occurs over time. For example, Vassanji says of Nurdin, “With the exception of a few phantoms of thought, he had been satisfied.” These individuals are exactly the same. But at this moment, he experienced tremors of change within himself, as well as new yearnings” (Vassanji, 1991, p. 84). The men who are part of the diaspora initially attempt to live in their new homes based on their previous conceptions of what it means to be masculine. However, as time passes, they come to the realization that in order to fulfil the new longing that is there within them, they will need to let go of certain aspects of their previous selves. This continues until they have undergone such a profound transformation that they can fulfil the societal expectations of their new home to a greater extent than they did of their previous home. In the same way that Nurdin struggled to overcome his masculine beliefs and, as a result, had a tough time deciding on a career, the Nurdins who are currently living in the diaspora eventually realize that it is more vital to have a job than it is to satisfy masculine principles that do not apply in their new land. After much deliberation, Nurdin decides to accept a job that, even though he considers beneath him, he does so because of the financial benefits and other rewards that he receives from doing it. A profession that he equates to that of a servant in Dar, and one that would have required him to wear a uniform, is the one that he is currently working. When he was in Toronto, he was not compelled to wear a uniform and was receiving greater benefits than a person of the same position in Dar. The idea that he sees himself as a manager of supplies is something that his wife proposes he does to mentally accept the work as being one that satisfies his criteria of masculinity. In addition, the high wage makes it possible for him to act as the primary provider for his family, which is something he has a strong desire to do. As a consequence of his incapacity to care for his family, he loses the respect of his children and his wife, who takes solace in religion and, as a result, stops having sexual contact with him for some years. This causes Nurdin to experience sexual frustration. According to Gwendolyn Etter-Lewis, “in every culture, from the moment a person is born, being identified as a boy or girl determines how the person will be treated, how they will be expected to behave, and how they will be expected to view the world” (Etter-Lewis, 2010). In their essay titled *Becoming an Adult: The Training of Children in Ghana*, it is explained:

Every society has prescriptions for appropriate characteristics, behaviours, and forms of social intercourse of its members – the young and the old, nobles and commoners, black and white, married and unmarried, females and males, and all of these are under-girded by gendered expectations. These prescriptions and expectations

are embedded in the societies' institutions ranging from the family, through schools, to religious and political institutions and systems. (Adomako Ampofo & Boateng, 2009, p. 241)

Nurdin hails from a society in which it is expected of a man to earn a living to provide for his family. Additionally, he comes from a family that has a high social position. It was humiliating for him to be in a situation where he felt like a burden to his family and, as a result, he had to assist his wife with the domestic responsibilities that she was responsible for at home. The fact that he was offered a job in the public sector that required him to perform tasks that he had mentally categorized as "female work" was not only humiliating but also disrespectful. It is consequently his physical representation of the pent-up frustration that he has as a result of the humiliation of repeatedly being offered jobs that he perceives to be beneath him and having to perform roles that he considers to be feminine. His reaction of refusing to sweep the floor in the public arena is therefore his reaction.

In African cultural values, the most important function of a man in a marriage is to fulfil his marital responsibilities, particularly in terms of providing for the material well-being of his wife (or spouses) and children (Gyeky, 1996). Consequently, it is not surprising that when Nurdin and Zera move to Canada, they switch positions in terms of the tasks that were required of them as husband and wife. Although this improves Zera's standing and expands her opportunities in Canada, Nurdin is forced to face a lower status as a husband because his gender results in fewer economic opportunities. The fact that he is unable to engage in sexual contact with his wife is a further blow to his masculinity because it prevents him from fulfilling his wife sexually. As mentioned earlier, this is one of the expectations that he is supposed to fulfil in his role as a husband. As a result of this, Nurdin is affected to the extent that he goes to peep shows with a coworker and comes dangerously close to committing adultery to fulfil his sexual need to feel like a man once more, one who is capable of sexually fulfilling a woman.

In his book *Masculine Migrations*, Daniel Coleman makes the comment that he concentrates on the disruptions that migration provides to men and declares that "Sometimes, these disruptions are caused by the inflections that occur when a male character tries to adapt the masculine practices of a familiar culture to an unfamiliar one. Other times, this adaptive behaviour reveals itself in discomfort under, or sometimes conflict between, inherited or imposed codes of masculinity" (Coleman, 1998, p. 161). In an interview with Shane Rhodes, M. G. Vassanji himself observes that "the people who come to Canada are not just Canadian content; they bring with them their own intricate pasts" (Vassanji, 1996). This statement lends credence to his perspective and lends weight to his claim. The point that this paper advances, which is that males in the African diaspora confront challenges to their masculinity as a result of finding themselves in a foreign culture with different standards of masculinity, is further supported by this evidence.

When it comes to this epigraph, Jonathan Rollins makes the observation that "the false promise of the fresh start or amnesiac self-reinvention in a new place is summarized in the epigraph in *No New Land*" (Rollins, 2014). In *No New Land*, Nurdin and Jamal envision a new beginning in Canada that is brimming with positive potential. They do not anticipate the difficulties that may arise in their masculinity. Instead, they envision a new land that is brimming with promise and will serve as a boost to their sense of masculinity. As far as Nurdin is concerned, he does not picture himself performing menial tasks or chores around the house. Jamal also did not anticipate that he would travel to Canada in order to conceal samosas in his suitcase and then sell them to a convenience store. In his mind, he was traveling to a place where he would be able to have his fantasies come true. The distinction between Jamal and Nurdin lies in the fact that Jamal utilized his time spent selling samosas and being looked down upon as fuel for his goals, whilst Nurdin settled for whatever he could get his hands on, while also being selective about what was available to him. Jamal was willing to take a few steps down the ladder to realize his dream of being at the top of the ladder, where he could proudly place his hand on his chest and puff his chest out as a sign of his accomplishments as a man and as a statement of his masculinity. By the time the narrative is over, he has become a lawyer who lives in a luxurious home, drives a luxurious car, dresses in luxurious clothing, and associates with people who are in the upper echelons of society. However, Nurdin is not willing to confront the problems that his manhood presents him with, although he has dreams. Disappointingly, rather than focusing on how his frustrations at the challenges to his masculinity might be channelled into completing his dreams or utilizing his frustrations as fuel to strive harder toward fulfilling his aspirations, he spends more time sulking and venting his feelings. He does this instead of looking at how his frustrations can be channelled toward fulfilling his dreams. Therefore, by the time the novel is over, he is still a part of the same social circle that he was a part of right from the beginning. Due to the fact that he continues to adhere to the standards of manhood that were prevalent in Tanzania, he is unable to climb the social ladder. He is resentful of the things that he must do in the beginning stages to attain his dreams. He lost the respect and devotion of his wife and children as he continued to act in this manner. In the narrative, Nanji is shown as a part-time instructor at a university who resides in a neighbourhood that is not very wealthy and in an apartment that is not adequately furnished. Jamal and his wife's impression of his residence is evidence that he is steadily climbing the social ladder by the time the story is over. This is demonstrated by the fact that he is at the top of the social ladder.

In the research paper titled "Hegemonic Penile Discourses and Continuities in Penile Conceptualizations", Fiaveh makes the observation that "the penile discourse in Ghana is dependent on factors such as demographic profile, penile characteristics, health conditions, social factors, and myths and misconceptions" (Fiaveh, 2017). Similar factors, such as a person's demographic profile, health condition, social factors, myths, and misconceptions, influence Black men's masculinity whether they are at home or in the African diaspora, as well as their ability to adapt to new environments.

These factors influence people's ideas of what it means to be masculine in relation to sexual performance. Therefore, it is possible to draw the conclusion that many men of the African diaspora who migrate experience challenges to their masculinity, particularly in their roles as breadwinners and parents in their marriages and families, as well as in the kind of professions that are available to them in their new countries, particularly in Western contexts. Those individuals who can overcome these obstacles, such as Jamal, ultimately find themselves climbing higher up the social ladder after a period during which they have lowered themselves in terms of their previous culture to align themselves with the requirements of their new community. Those individuals, such as Nurdin, who continue to cling to their outdated conceptions of what it means to be masculine continue to occupy a lower position on the social hierarchy.

V. CONCLUSION

Globalization and changing social expectations of gender roles have compelled men to delineate and rebuild male identities by making this repositioning in their private and personal lives (Mohd Radzi et al., 2018). Therefore, they are unable to meet the expectations of masculinity of their previous societies in the new land or to meet the expectations of masculinity in their new home. As a consequence, they begin to accept anything that is offered to them and attempt to persuade themselves that it satisfies their expectations of masculinity and that it meets their expectations. The third group, much like Nanji, possesses the potential and the foundations that are in place; but like Nanji, they require a push to strive toward their potential. Once motivated, these individuals are able to work hard to achieve their goals and are able to overcome the worries and moments when they feel frozen and emasculated. This is similar to how Nanji begins to improve the way he decorates his flat and gradually climbs the ladder.

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Anju J is a committed Research Scholar in the Department of English and Foreign Languages at SRM Institute of Science and Technology, Kattankulathur Campus, Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India. Email ID: aj7336@srmist.edu.in. She has a fervent passion for research in diaspora studies exploring the narratives of immigrants and their communities wavering. Her research focuses on the multifaceted experiences of diaspora populations, aiming to shed light on the cultural, social, and economic impacts of migration. She is driven by a deep-seated belief in the power of research to advocate for immigrant rights and contribute to academic discourse on global migration.



P. Tamilarasan is currently working as an Associate Professor in the Department of English and Foreign Languages at SRM Institute of Science and Technology, Kattankulathur Campus, Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India. Email ID: tamilarp@srmist.edu.in. He has been teaching English for 23 years to students of Engineering and Technology, Nursing, Humanities, and Allied Health Sciences at SRM Institute of Science and Technology. He has a distinguished record of publication in academic journals worldwide with Scopus, Web of Science, and UGC Care indexes. His research expertise includes African American Literature, English Language Teaching, Diasporic Studies, and Indian writing in English. As an active researcher, Dr. P. Tamilarasan has participated and presented in various National and International seminars and conferences. He is also a dedicated partner to university programs and outreach events that help promote learning and support the community. He holds an ORCID ID of 0000-0002-8236-948X.