

# Cultural Assimilation in M.G. Vassanji's the Book of Secrets

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## Abstract:

The collective social behaviour, institutions, and norms present in human societies are collectively referred to as culture. This word also includes the people who make up these groups collective knowledge, beliefs, arts, laws, conventions, and habits. Culture is often said to have emerged from or been influenced by a particular area or place. A cultural belief codifies appropriate behaviour in society; it provides a framework for expected social behaviour in terms of conduct, clothing, language, and manner in a given setting. The present research paper attempts to discuss the variety of cultures seen in different communities and provides evidence that humans acquire culture through learning processes of adaptation and assimilation.

**Keywords:** Assimilation, Culture, Community, Migration, Memory.

As said by M. K. Gandhi "A nation's culture resides in the hearts and in the soul of its people". The term 'cultural code' refers to a number of interrelated ideas regarding a set of customs, norms, and common behaviours that are unique to a particular area of a society. According to one view, a cultural code defines a collection of pictures that are connected to a certain set of preconceptions in our thoughts. This is a type of cultural unconscious that even we are unaware of, but which is evident in our behaviour. Understanding a nation's cultural norms may help one discover the kind of behaviours that its population exhibit. Religion, gender, relationships, income, food, health, and cultural differences are all taken into account in the fundamental norms for comprehending individual behaviours.

Cultural assimilation refers to the process through which a minority group or culture adopts, wholly or partly, the values, behaviours, and beliefs of another group in order to become more like the society's dominant group.

Minority groups are supposed to assimilate into the daily customs of the majority culture via language and appearance as well as through more economically significant criteria like integration into the existing cultural networks. While some forms of cultural assimilation, such as cultural integration, are more common in multicultural communities, which involve a minority group within a given society adopting aspects of the dominant culture through cultural diffusion or outright assimilation, other forms of cultural assimilation, such as acculturation, involve a minority group completely assimilate into the dominant culture. According to a conception, acculturation and cultural assimilation are similar processes. There have been many distinct kinds of cultural integration throughout history, including involuntary assimilation and voluntary assimilation. Malcolm Bradbury states "Culture is a way of coping with the world by defining it in detail".

In *The Book of Secrets*, the narrator Pius Fernandes uses a diary to assemble Corbin's incomplete story and provides insight on the diary's past. He subsequently wrote another book, but neither the problems nor the identities were resolved. It is a story about hidden relationships, innermost secrets, and assimilation of various cultures. Pius Fernandes, a former gaon teacher who currently lives in Tanzania, spent his whole professional career in Africa. His former student Feroz asks him to study Alfred Corbin's diary. Every section of the diary has a thread that Pius tries to weave together. Corbin was an administrator in British East Africa. Corbin is cared by Mariamu, Mukhi's niece, when he becomes sick, and their relationship grows as a consequence. In the meanwhile, Corbin received his transfer from Kikono. After sometime Pipa marries Mariamu. But Pipa finds himself in trouble as it gets revealed that Mariamu was previously engaged with Corbin. This is the reason Pipa started to question her virginity.

Mariamu gave birth to a son, and the boy's look makes everything plain because he has fair skin and grey eyes. Mariamu was raped and killed in an unknown circumstance. Her belongings were kept by Pipa in memory of the dead Mariamu.

The son of Mariamu, who was married to Sherbanoo and raised a family in Dar, had an extramarital affair with Rita, a former student of Pius. Rita's relationship with the diary was close and personal. She disclosed all Ali had told her with the condition that nothing would be made public because it relates to someone's background. Pius views history as a never-ending process that circulates. At Rita's request, Pius agreed to quit dairy writing and hand over the dairy to Rita.

Since Corbin acknowledged having spent time in Uganda in his early 30s, Pius assumed through Gregory's collection of poems that Rita had given him that they were related. Corbin lost his diary when he was transferred and preceded by the District Commissioner. Between 1937 and 1972, Anne and Corbin each wrote three letters, which Gregory has in his box. These letters dispel Pius's concerns and shed light on Corbin and Gregory's close bond.

Pius Fernandes, a character portrayed by Vassanji, serves as a communication for the story of history, fact, and fiction. He visits the locations listed in the diary with the help of the entries in the journal. He compiles historical imagery in the form of written records. One's existence parallels one's personal and public past, which occasionally leaves one in an uncomfortable condition.

Vassanji has described about the small Shamsi Muslim community which struggled hard to maintain its originality. It developed under many pressures and transformed itself by the process of adaptation. In order to depict all the transformations and assimilations Vassanji has used the name of characters in the novels which imply sometimes Islam, occasionally Hinduism and sometimes there are mixed names that are mixture of both religious affiliations. Rita, Feroz, Nurmohammad Pipa, Sona, Pius Fernandes. These names suggest secular beliefs of Shamsis and their bond with their Hindu ancestry.

In order to provide a thorough socio-cultural study, *The Book of Secrets* depicts the many food types and eating patterns of the Shamsi community. The distinctiveness of the Shamsi community's people and cultural system is reflected in its food habits. The Shamsi enjoy Gujarati food as their local cuisine, although migration to other countries forces them to adapt their eating habits. Indian immigrants carry their local eating customs across continents and, since they live in groups, they can afford to do so. The first generation of Indian immigrants to the African coast were used to eating wheat, rice, and leafy greens, as well as adapting to the local staple foods. They also consume coco yams and other African crops in addition to their wheat and rice.

One of the Shamsi trades is dressmaking. One essential amenity of life is clothing, which also represents the culture of the local area or community. A transformation has been brought about through

migration and the introduction of African clothing to the Shamsi group. “It was an occasion for kofias and kanzus, turbans, frocks, and pachedis” (TBOS 44). The Book of Secrets by Vassanji, however, depicts that there is also a significant variance in their clothing: “Africans in all manner of attire, kanzus, tattered trousers, buibui, khanga cloth, stood behind on one side; Indians in turbans and fezzes, suits, dhoties, and frock-pachedis, stood on another” (TBOS 192). Shamsi’s wedding dress had an odd colour compared to traditional Islamic wedding colours. In contrast to maroon, who is dressed in a white outfit that is traditionally worn by widows in India, Mariamu wears the green colour for her wedding.

Every community uses language as its primary form of communication. To authenticate the other two aspects, location and character that are shown in their works, the authors of the South Asian Diaspora deliberately adopt the functional forms of the languages that have been spoken in their community. Vassanji has created a regionalized version of English for his narration and speaks numerous languages. The story contains terms in Gujarati, Hindi, Urdu, and Arabic. Vocabularies in Swahili and Cutchi-Gujarati are employed. For instance, ‘Kanzu’, a long, light cotton outfit ‘Mchawi’ is a witch doctor or wizard, while ‘Mbuyu’ is a baobab tree. The Shamsi people’s syncretized belief in pirs and Vishnu avatars is expressed via language. The origins and implications of this group are mapped by terms from Arabic, Sanskrit, Urdu, Gujarati, and Hindi. Islamic nuance is produced by the eve of Juma, shahada, aulaad, niani, maghrab, and vismillah. The phrases ‘sandhya jiv bhagvan guruji’ and ‘dhan’ have subtle Hindu overtones. Other Indian and Gujarati words like ‘moto divas’, ‘chadar’, ‘bapu ji’, ‘mela’, ‘golis’, and ‘duka’ are used to express Indianness. These terms are used to chart the community’s linguistic history. Immigration forces newcomers to adapt by learning the language of the host country. There are several areas where speaking the local tongue is required. In order to seem competent, job candidates polish and Canadianize their accents. Students are instructed to experiment with various accents, adapt, and practise idioms. Thomas Wolfe says- “Culture is the arts elevated to a set of beliefs.”

The communication between the European communities and the Indian communities in *The Book of Secrets* takes place in English and Swahili. Andru Peek observes- “with reference to the feisty use of vocabulary from two non-English languages in the novel (Swahili and Cutchi-Gujarati) the author’s note emphasises that these are intended to be integral to the next though there is a glossary for further assistance” (63). Swahili terminology in particular and African phrases in general are used in the narrative to enhance the adaptation’s Africanization. In the *Hybridity of the Use of Two Languages*, David Stouck has given an interesting argument in favour of the use of foreign words in a novel. He says, “An interesting way to consider how literary texts make us experience other cultures is through language which is not completely translated for us by the author. (67).

Occupation mainly ‘shop keeper’ or ‘dukawallah’ community. The primary employment was trade. Their business included dressmaking and fancy shops. The Shamsis merchants do business on a huge variety, including wholesale, retail, and import/export. The Book of Secrets’ Pipa’s store, which is operated by Pipa and Feroz, as well as The Gunny Sack’s Dhanji Govindji’s shop in Matamu and Kulsum’s shop in Dar-es-Salaam in No New Land, all have stores. In addition to these shops, there is a mention of pili pili bazarf, which alludes to the sale of popular spices: “when news of the war came, Pipa had received the ADC’s permission to stay in town and run his pili-pili bizari business, selling kerosene and copra oil, spices and tobacco” (TBOS 121). Among Shamsis, having a store is an inherited characteristic. In Amriika, one of the characters explains why they can’t seem to avoid business: “whatever professions we studied for and practiced, we can’t seem to stay away from business. It’s in our blood...?” (183).

Occasions were celebrated with utmost grandiosity accompanied with all rituals. Weddings are a significant social and domestic ritual. “The Swahili sheikh read the nikaa in Arabic, and the bride and groom then signed the register...” (TBOS 126). This is how the Shamsis consecrate and legitimise their marriages. (TBOS 126). There are instances of Hindu traditions throughout the book, such as the rangoli decoration: “ On the hard ground in front of them were geometric designs drawn earlier by the women using coloured flour, and beyond these auspicious markings the remaining guests sat facing the couple” (TBOS 85). By music and dance, festivals and occasions were celebrated. The Shamsis celebrate all Indian holidays with joy. The establishment of the Shamsi religion in India is seen as significant; “the occasion was the October ‘happiness’ to celebrate the community’s founding in India” (TBOS 144). Alfred Corbin recounts in his diary about the family celebration he had seen while residing there - “Eight men dancing round a tent pole, each with an eighteen-inch stick in his right hand, the left holding onto a long red or green ribbon which descended from the top of the pole” (TBOS 127). Another tradition practised in the community’s festivities is the stepping on of lucky clay saucers during wedding rituals. Also, it has been observed that “older women supported brass pots of sweet milk on the heads of younger, unmarried women and girls. They walked in a long file through the crowds, to where the mukhi and other elders, in robes and turbans, would receive them and give each girl a shilling” (TBOS 259). An overview of the Garba dance is provided, and its significance is noted. This dance is also known as ‘Dandia’, a celebration defined by holiness and joy. The last rounds of the dandia stick dance were being performed in a crescendo as they approached their conclusion, and ‘pleasure’ was at its peak (TBOS 258). Gujarat is the place where the Gujarati traditional dance ‘garba’ began. The word ‘garba’ means ‘womb’ in Sanskrit, while the word ‘deep’ refers to a little earthenware lamp. They dance around the centre, bending sideways with each step and make sweeping motions with their arms. Each action is followed by a clap. *The Book of Secrets* makes reference to the beginning of this society via the garba dance, saying that “the garba enacted the first conversions of the community from Hinduism, several centuries ago in Gujarat, he was told” (TBOS 42).

Births, memorials and wedding of pirs are also celebrated in Shamsi community. Sometimes, there are fairs which are referred as ‘melas’ for gracing the occasion of a holy man’s visit or any sort of festive event in dargahs. The death of Suleman Pir engenders anguish among Shamsis who mourn his death for forty days: “For forty days the warren-like streets in the town- Kichwele to Ingles, Ring to Acacia- hummed with a chant, a prayer sung with one voice, occasionally reverberating with a wail for the person who had advised them on everything...” (TBOS 266). Widow/widower remarriage is affordable and this opportunity is presented irrespective of gender in the Shamsi community. In *The Book of Secrets* Pipa is also encouraged to remarry and he remarries Remti after the death of Mariamu. In *The Gunny Sack* Moti is allowed to remarry by the permission of her in laws.

Prayer timing is also mentioned and it is a habitual procedure of the characters as observed by Corbin. Characters used to pray two times in a day- dawn and dusk. “Upon inquiring later in the morning, I was told that the Indian Shamsis wake up at 4 A.M to pray!” (TBOS 34). Food offering in mosque is also considered a form of communication with the dead. Pipa offers food in his local mosque on the name of mariamu. Shamsis owes to their Islamic beliefs. There are rituals to benefit the jinn on the morning of Eid- “When the choicest cooking is taken to mosque in the name of the dead (food for the body transformed into prayers from the soul); and on Layl-tul-qadr, when angels descend upon the earth to bestow blessings” (TBOS 208). It is believed that mbuyu tree is the abode of a dijin and the tree itself is looked upon with dread during dusk, “The shetani resided in mbuyu trees” (TBOS 70).

In an interview with Ray Deonandan- Vassanji acknowledges: “My stories are about individual characters, but they must be seen in context of their community”. Seeking forgiveness is another spiritual gesture of the Shamsis, as they believe in committing seven sins unintentionally. Arun P. Mukherjee observes “the shamsis are very well knit through ties of kinship and religion. (87). Mukhi acting as a spiritual mentor attends to his community individuals, “remember what they teach in mosque. Everyone, no matter how pure, commits at least seven sin a day. That is the nature of life. That is why every day in mosque we go to the mukhi and ask for forgiveness” (TBOS 220).

As David McClelland, a psychologist, understands affiliation as a need. He describes affiliation as a person’s need to have a sense that he is part of a social group. Ray Deonandan, in his review on *The Book of Secrets* notes, “The evolution of community is an important theme in the book. The preservice of Arab-Indian culture and the preservation of its community’s central tenets despite geo-political tumult and commercial forces of change are binding strings kept strong and taught in Vassanji’s thematic web.” Johan Huizinga states that if we want to preserve culture we must continue to create it. Sudha Pandya observes that the writers are preoccupied with their pasts and their effort is to recreate the life of the community. According to Khan & Kalamani new ideas germinate through the process of dismantling and reconstructing history is an excellent approach in literary ambiance. Vassanji has tried this process to assimilate the culture of his community with the help of his narration in all his works.

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