

**A PLACE WITHIN:
REDISCOVERING INDIA**

by M.G. Vassanji
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Reviewed by BEN FRUMIN

IN 1994, M.G. Vassanji won the first-ever Giller Prize—which bills itself as “Canada’s premier prize for fiction”—for *The Book of Secrets* which, like many of Mr. Vassanji’s novels, explores the lives and histories of Indian immigrants in East Africa. Mr. Vassanji won the Giller Prize again in 2003 for *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall*—once again about an Indian in East Africa—and was shortlisted for the award in 2007 (rechristened by this time as the Scotia-bank Giller Prize) for *The Assassin’s Song* which, in a departure perhaps best cast as slight, focused on a Westernized Indian man’s return to his ancestral homeland.

In his recently published *A Place Within: Rediscovering India*, Mr. Vassanji returns once again to this familiar territory, telling the story of an East African of Indian descent who returns to the land of his kin. But unlike much of Mr. Vassanji’s earlier work, *A Place Within* will not win or even be nominated for any awards honoring Canada’s best fiction. That’s because *A Place Within* is true; its main character is Mr. Vassanji.

Like many of the fictional Indo-African characters that populate his novels, Mr. Vassanji was not born in India. Neither were his parents. It was his paternal great grandfather and, on Mr. Vassanji’s mother’s side, his grandparents who left India for Africa roughly a century ago. Mr. Vassanji, who now lives in Toronto, grew up in Dar es Salaam (today Tanzania’s largest city), where he thought of India as

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“the ancestral homeland, the village, if you will,” a place he characterized as “poor, backward, and laughable—the past.” Still, Mr. Vassanji had always intended to visit, though “the possibility receded in some back drawer of the mind.” It wasn’t until the early 1990s, when he published a novel in India and was soon invited to attend a conference there, that Mr. Vassanji embarked on a middle-age journey of discovery that would bring him back to India many times, from the southern backwaters of Kerala to the touristy Himalayan hill station of Dharamsala and many places in between. Mr. Vassanji’s travels in and ruminations about India would consume much of his life over the next decade and a half as he tried to answer a seemingly simple question: “What was India to me?”

Mr. Vassanji felt “an uncontrollable and perhaps vain desire to know and record who I am.” Origins and history “became an obsession, both a curse and a thrilling call.” The answers, he implies, were to be found in India. Of course, the number of “I-found-myself-in-India” memoirs has swelled in recent years, and though the catalogue has plenty of first-rate members (Gregory David Roberts’ *Shantaram*, for instance), it also includes sappy, eye-rolling bestsellers (such as Elizabeth Gilbert’s *Eat, Pray, Love*). Mr. Vassanji’s addition is hardly the genre’s best, and stumbles often. Still, *A Place Within* is instructive and worth reading. Mr. Vassanji’s India is observed both wryly and lovingly, by a man at once insider and outsider, and the book does not shy from confronting many of India’s most troubling realities.

Arriving in India for the first time in 1993, Mr. Vassanji was desperate to experience anything and everything, worried that “even in the distraction of a blink I might miss something profoundly significant.” Of course, he soon realized that he could not “go anxiously searching for it [India], seeking nuance under every stone and be-

hind every wall.” In fact, like many first-time visitors with expectations of majesty and epiphany, Mr. Vassanji’s initial reaction to India was disappointment. Arriving at 3 a.m. in New Delhi’s airport, he was “hit by an overwhelmingly wretched sense of the familiar. Long lines, people jumping queues, patient, bemused officials.” Soon enough though, Mr. Vassanji writes, India “spoke to me; I found myself responding to it, it mattered to me. It was as if a part of me which had lain dormant all the while had awakened and reclaimed me.”

Sadly, such too-general teases are just about as close as the reader gets in *A Place Within* to understanding how exactly Mr. Vassanji and his inner life changed as he rediscovered India and, presumably, himself. The reader joins him on vividly described

multiday journeys on crowded trains and on compelling visits with astute professors, religious extremists, a cricket star, an aging, shirtless writer and agitated student radicals. But the truth of what Mr. Vassanji learns of himself through these experiences remains something of a mystery. Instead, *A Place Within* is strongest when Mr. Vassanji turns his considerable talent outward to the idiosyncrasies of India: horn-honking drivers (“this happy-fierce toot-toot gives him license, a right, and he uses it effectively, though I wonder for how long”), street-wandering cows (“They belonged to no one, Krishan told me. They are simply tolerated”), young India’s obsession with America (“Cool India...is to some degree Mimic India”), *jalebi* desserts (“dipped in syrup, rich yellow and dripping, sticky whorls of sweet”), Bollywood (“that exotic fairy-tale mirror of Indian society”), and too-common hovels (“dark gaping mouths housing extreme poverty”).

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It is as an observer of the world rather than himself that Mr. Vassanji seems most comfortable.

Sometimes, however, Mr. Vassanji cannot help but involve himself. His initial arrival in India—in January 1993—coincided with violent religious riots that ripped Mumbai apart. Hundreds died, and India’s most populous city was infected with fanaticism and fear. Sixteen years later, the riots are widely considered one of modern India’s most consequential events. At first, Mr. Vassanji was able to keep Mumbai’s terror at arm’s length, felt only “dim-

ly and distantly,” as he avoided visiting India’s suddenly afflicted financial capital. But soon enough, “the reality of the horrors of the ‘riots’ became impossible to ignore.” Mr. Vassanji spends much of *A Place Within* exploring

India’s “barbaric blight” of religious intolerance-turned-violence, never quite able to feel at home in a place whose people seem too easily resigned to the sad reality of such conflict. It seems impossible to disown the “truly unfathomable” violence of these religious mobs, to select which India is his and which is not: “[D]o I simply shun, reject as not mine, what I cannot cope with, while accepting gratefully what I can?” The implication is one cannot pick and choose. It is India in its entirety that one must embrace, or not.

A Place Within is not only a personal history. History in the broader sense, often unknown or underappreciated by most, is also something of an obsession of Mr. Vassanji’s, and he offers several general pronouncements on the past, many of which obfuscate more than they illuminate. History is “selective, discontinuous,” “addictive,” “fragmentary and disputed,” “dizzying” and “always relevant.” It makes

us “ponder about our own humanity and times.” But in *A Place Within*, history tends, mostly, to be a tedious distraction. Mr. Vassanji regularly takes pages-long detours hundreds of years into the past in many heroically researched attempts to provide historical context for a building, person or community he visits. However, while the palace intrigues of 16th-century Mughal dynasties and the architectural preferences of British colonialists can sometimes make good reading, such stories barely seem relevant to Mr. Vassanji’s quest to discover India and himself. This is illustrative of a larger problem with the book. Too often and jarringly, it jolts from biography to dynastic history, from travelogue to philosophy, from moralistic tut-tutting to restaurant recommendations. In trying to do too many things, Mr. Vassanji does none as well as he could. It is difficult to find the thread that runs through them all.

Near the end of *A Place Within*, Mr. Vassanji describes a visit he made to Kanya Kumari, a town in the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu that sits at the tip of a triangle of land hanging out into the sea. On a nearby island, he finds a 133-foot statue of the “Tamil poet-guru Tiruvalluvar,” which took 500 sculptors nine years to complete. “It is undoubtedly a magnificent achievement,” he writes, “though one wonders what the point of it is, here, blotting the view of the sea from the mainland.” One might say something similar of *A Place Within*. Mr. Vassanji’s achievements are undisputed, his talent exceptional. Too often, though, his memoir blots the view.