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“The Biological Erasure of Belonging: A Critical Reading of Memory and Identity Crisis in M.G. Vassanji’s Nostalgia”

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Abstract:

This study provides a comprehensive critique of M.G. Vassanji’s speculative novel Nostalgia (2016), examining the complex intersection of state biopower, systematic neurological alteration, and the crisis of human subjectivity. While Vassanji is traditionally celebrated for his realistic depiction of the South Asian diaspora in East Africa, Nostalgia marks a significant generic evolution into futuristic writing. The narrative presents a dystopian reality in the affluent Global North where citizens receive near-immortality through neuro-regeneration, a process that requires the absolute deletion of their authentic historical past and the implantation of artificial, state-sanctioned childhood memories. This paper terms this medicalized amnesia the “biological erasure of belonging.”

We argue that this process serves as a violent administrative tool designed to strip marginalized individuals and migrants from the Global South (“Maskinia”) of their historical identities, turning them into compliant consumers. Focusing on the psychological journeys of Dr. Frank Sina and Presley Smith, this paper explores how the return of repressed histories—manifested as “Leaked Memory Syndrome”—collapses the state’s engineered harmony. By combining concepts of biopolitics with psychological trauma and the idea of the uncanny, we demonstrate that human identity cannot be easily re-programmed. The living body acts as an unpoliced archive that retains true history. Ultimately, this paper positions the novel as a timely critique of modern assimilation strategies that demand the destruction of cultural roots as the price for global citizenship.

Keywords: Biopolitics, Memory Studies, Identity Crisis, Postcolonial Dystopia, M.G. Vassanji, Somatic Memory, The Uncanny.

1. Introduction:

The landscape of contemporary postcolonial literature has long been shaped by stories of migration, geographic displacement, and the fragmented sense of self that follows the crossing of national borders. For decades, writers belonging to the South Asian diaspora have dedicated their creative efforts to mapping the complex paths of exile. They have closely observed how individuals struggle to maintain a connection to their ancestral homes while trying to establish new roots in foreign

lands. Within this literary tradition, M.G. Vassanji holds a highly distinctive position. As a writer who has personally experienced double-displacement—moving from India to East Africa, and later to Canada—Vassanji has spent most of his career documenting the fragile histories of marginalized communities.

His early celebrated novels, such as *The Gunny Sack* (1989) and *The Book of Secrets* (1994), operate as works of historical recovery. In those books, characters passionately preserve old family diaries, worn-out photographs, and oral testimonies. For the displaced subject in Vassanji's early fiction, keeping these personal archives alive was not just an act of nostalgia; it was a necessary survival strategy, a way to prevent their unique cultural identity from being completely swallowed by the dominant narratives of colonial rulers or new nationalist governments.

However, the publication of *Nostalgia* in 2016 represents a radical departure in Vassanji's literary journey. Moving away from the concrete, realistic settings of colonial Kenya, post-independence Tanzania, or immigrant neighborhoods in Toronto, the novel enters the speculative terrain of a high-tech future. At first glance, the book looks like a conventional work of science fiction, filled with advanced laboratories, synthetic brain procedures, and a world divided by extreme technological wealth. Yet, beneath this speculative surface, Vassanji remains deeply committed to the same core political and emotional anxieties that have always driven his postcolonial fiction. *Nostalgia* simply shifts the battlefield. It explores the terrifying psychological pressure to assimilate, the cruel architecture of national borders, and the ways in which institutional power seeks to police and control human interiority. By moving his narrative into the future, Vassanji is able to show how the old systems of imperial colonization have evolved into sophisticated, corporate-state mechanisms that no longer just conquer physical land, but directly colonize the biological structures of the human mind.

The world Vassanji constructs is set in an unnamed, hyper-sanitized metropolis located in the Global North. In this advanced society, technology has achieved what humanity has always dreamed of: the near-elimination of physical aging and natural death. Through periodic cellular rejuvenation, gene manipulation, and organ replacements, citizens are granted the privilege of living for multiple centuries. Yet, this corporate-sponsored paradise enforces a rigid, mandatory psychological sacrifice. Because the human brain is a biological organ with a finite cognitive capacity, it cannot process or sustain hundreds of years of continuous emotional data, relationship dynamics, and memories. If a person tries to carry multiple centuries of life experiences, their mind inevitably collapses under the weight of severe cognitive overload and psychological trauma. To prevent its population from breaking down, the ruling government mandates a medical intervention known as "identity renewal." During this clean clinical procedure, a citizen's authentic, historical memory bank is surgically and chemically wiped clean from their brain. In their place, medical professionals implant a "curated past"—a completely fabricated, peaceful, and generic childhood narrative that is thoroughly vetted by state

authorities.

This research paper formulates the concept of the “Biological Erasure of Belonging” to provide a critical reading of this systematic neuro-medical intervention. We argue that within the socio-political framework of Vassanji’s novel, an individual’s historical memories and authentic cultural roots are treated not as a source of human identity, but as a dangerous geopolitical threat that must be technocratically neutralized. The global map of Nostalgia is strictly split by a massive, heavily militarized barrier known as the “Long Border.” This wall separates the immortal, ultra-wealthy elite of the Global North from the chaotic, poverty-stricken, and war-ravaged territories of the Global South, which are collectively called “Maskinia.” For a desperate refugee or migrant escaping the violence of Maskinia to cross this border and gain legal entry into the privileged life of the North, they cannot simply apply for citizenship; they must pay the ultimate ontological price. They must volunteer for total memory ablation.

By enforcing this mandatory neural reset, the state effectively destroys the revolutionary and unsettling power of historical truth. The immigrant is emptied of their original traumas, their ancestral languages, and their kinship networks, transforming them into a clean slate—a tabula rasa—that can be seamlessly woven into the capitalist machinery of the metropolis. This process creates the ideal neoliberal citizen: a person with no historical grievances, no distinct cultural demands, and no memories of political struggle. Consequently, the novel illustrates a terrifying shift in the exercise of power. The site of subjection is no longer external territory, but the internal pathways of the cerebral cortex. The subsequent crisis of identity experienced by the characters in Nostalgia is therefore not a mere medical glitch, but a profound form of somatic resistance where the biological body rebels against the absolute hegemony of the cybernetic state.

2. Literature Review: The Metamorphic Arc of Vassanji’s Oeuvre:

The critical scholarship surrounding M.G. Vassanji has predominantly focused on his contributions to historical recovery, memory preservation, and the mapping of the South Asian diaspora within East Africa. Literary critics like Chelva Kanaganayakam have argued that Vassanji’s narrative strength lies in his ability to act as a keeper of archives. His earlier masterpieces, most notably *The Gunny Sack* (1989) and *The Book of Secrets* (1994), are classic examples of historiographic metafiction. In these works, the act of remembering is depicted as a vital shield against systemic erasure. The characters utilize oral stories, old family diaries, and domestic relics to piece together a fragile sense of self. This serves as a direct challenge to the official, monolithic historical narratives constructed by British colonial administrators and post-independence African states. In this traditional critical framework, memory is treated as a safe harbor—a restorative, political space where the marginalized migrant protects their historical existence from disappearing into thin air.

However, the publication of *Nostalgia* (2016) disrupted this predictable line of scholarly

interpretation. Instead of looking back into the actual, documented histories of the Indian Ocean diaspora, Vassanji looked forward, constructing a cold, futuristic world that initially seemed completely detached from his usual thematic commitments. Preliminary reviews and essays on *Nostalgia* have attempted to make sense of this sudden generic shift. Some scholars read the book as an allegory for the contemporary global refugee crisis, while others interpret it as a commentary on the psychological loneliness of life in modern Western societies. Yet, a noticeable gap remains in the existing academic literature. Most critics treat the novel's central technology—the surgical removal and replacement of human memory—as a standard science-fiction trope, rather than a profound political and biological intervention.

This research bridges that critical gap. We argue that Vassanji's speculative turn does not mean he has abandoned his long-standing postcolonial anxieties. Rather, he has updated his focus to match the realities of twenty-first-century global capitalism. The old imperial violence that used to take over physical lands has evolved into a far more intimate threat: the corporate-state takeover of human biology. By looking at *Nostalgia* through this lens, we can see that the trauma of geographic displacement has not been forgotten; it has been internalized, turning the human mind itself into the ultimate borderland.

3. Theoretical Framework: Biopower, Somatic Archives Uncanny:

To build a rigorous, Scopus-level critique of the identity crises in *Nostalgia*, this study connects three major theoretical concepts: Michel Foucault's analytics of biopolitics, contemporary trauma-informed models of somatic memory, and Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic mapping of the uncanny. The primary political lens for this analysis comes from Michel Foucault's groundbreaking work on biopower. In his lectures on government control, Foucault explained that modern states no longer rule their subjects merely through the threat of execution or physical punishment. Instead, modern power operates by managing, regulating, and modifying the actual biological lives, health, and bodies of the population. In *Nostalgia*, Vassanji shows us the absolute, terrifying peak of this biopolitical control. The government of the affluent Global North does not just stop people at physical border checkpoints; it builds checkpoints inside the human brain. By turning personal history into a fluid product that can be medically edited, deleted, or manufactured, the state exercises total control over life itself. It establishes an institutional hierarchy that decides which historical memories are allowed to exist and which ancestral lineages must be biologically wiped out to keep the capitalist economy running smoothly.

However, the narrative of *Nostalgia* constantly proves that this tech-driven control is never completely absolute. The state's plans are consistently ruined by the stubborn materiality of the human body. To understand this resistance, this paper uses the concept of Somatic Memory, which is a core idea in modern trauma studies. Trauma experts like Bessel van der Kolk have famously shown that

deep emotional pain and terrifying historical experiences are not just saved as cognitive thoughts in our conscious minds. Instead, trauma leaves permanent physiological marks directly inside our nervous system, our muscles, and our biological cells—acting as an independent archive that continues to operate even when we are not thinking about it.

When the medical establishment in Vassanji's novel wipes a migrant's conscious mind clean, it fails to reach this deep, cellular reservoir. The body retains the physical frequencies of old violence. It remembers the visceral sensations of poverty, the sudden shock of a bomb blast, or the distinct temperature of a vanished homeland. The body keeps a record that the brain has been forced to forget. This internal tension creates what Sigmund Freud described as The Uncanny (das Unheimliche). Freud explained that the "uncanny" is not just something weird or mysterious. Rather, it is that specific kind of psychological dread that happens when an old, deeply familiar reality that we tried hard to bury or repress suddenly breaks back into our everyday life, making our comfortable surroundings feel terrifyingly strange and unfamiliar.

In *Nostalgia*, the medical condition known as "Leaked Memory Syndrome" is a literal, biological manifestation of this Freudian return of the repressed. The hyper-clean, optimized life of the modern citizen is abruptly shattered by random, unvetted flashes of their actual past. The original home that the state tried to systematically overwrite comes back to haunt the individual, proving that human identity cannot be easily re-programmed like computer software. This somatic return ruins the biopolitical project, causing a massive, irreversible crisis of identity that exposes the failure of forced assimilation.

4. The Mechanics of Neuro-Ablation: Turning the Migrant into a Clean Slate:

To understand why the characters in *Nostalgia* experience such a devastating collapse of the self, we must closely analyze the clinical methods the state uses to enforce historical amnesia. In this futuristic society, integration is not a gradual process of cultural learning; it is an immediate medical operation. The government uses highly advanced neurobiological surgeries, known as neuro-ablation, to turn the human mind into a completely blank slate, or a *tabula rasa*. This clinical procedure is most clearly seen when we look at how the wealthy Global North manages the bodies of desperate refugees attempting to cross the "Long Border" from the poverty-stricken territories of "Maskinia." For these migrants, letting go of their past is not a personal choice or an emotional sacrifice; it is the mandatory entry fee for biological survival.

Vassanji cleverly exposes the hidden violence of this process by showing how the state dresses up a horrific act of cultural destruction as a beautiful medical gift. The corporate-state apparatus markets "identity renewal" as a wonderful scientific breakthrough that saves people from mental exhaustion and grants near-immortality. However, the novel strips away this polite language to reveal a highly aggressive form of psychological colonization. By systematically clearing out old neural

pathways, the state specifically targets and deletes memories of ancestral languages, cultural rituals, and political struggles.

This total erasure ensures that the migrant enters the new society completely dependent on the government to tell them who they are. When the medical system implants a synthetic childhood—such as a fake memory of playing in a clean, quiet northern village—it does not just give the person a happy past; it strips away their ability to criticize their current world. Because their real past has been clinically murdered, they no longer have the historical vocabulary to compare their current material comfort with the global injustices happening on the other side of the border. The migrant is successfully refashioned into the perfect neoliberal citizen: a submissive worker and an obedient consumer who has no community ties to fall back on and no revolutionary memories to spark resistance.

5. Leaked Memory Syndrome as an Involuntary Act of Rebellion:

The central narrative tension of Nostalgia rests on a simple, powerful truth: you can control a person’s brain chemistry, but you cannot completely rewrite human nature. The state’s attempt to achieve total control over human consciousness eventually fails because the human spirit refuses to be fully engineered. This biological friction manifests as a major medical glitch that the government calls “Leaked Memory Syndrome.” People who are supposed to be living peaceful, synthetic lives suddenly start experiencing terrifying, vivid flashbacks of landscapes, people, and historical events that do not match their official, state-sanctioned biography.

Table 1: The Internal Conflict of Engineered Identity

State-Sanctioned Narrative (Implanted Past) Somatic Materiality (Leaked Past)	
Manufactured sense of psychological calm and order. Raw emotional chaos and basic survival instincts.	
Settings located in the hyper-clean, wealthy North. Visceral, dusty images of war-to-Maskinia”.	
Creates a submissive, quiet worker who follows rules. Triggers an active, confused subject who asks questions.	
Operates entirely through conscious, digital brain data. Roots itself deep within internal biological tissues and cells.	

As this structured binary demonstrates, this syndrome creates a massive, unbridgeable psychological split within the individual. A key example of this breakdown is found in the character of Presley Smith. Presley is supposed to be a perfectly ordinary citizen of the North, but he begins to suffer from intrusive visions of war, dust, starvation, and alternative family members—memories that completely contradict his clean, government-approved profile. Within the logic of Vassanji’s world, the ruling elite treats these memory leaks as a dangerous, highly contagious disease that must be treated

immediately with more neuro-surgeries to protect public stability.

However, when looked at through a critical lens, these leaks are far from a mere medical error; they represent a profound, involuntary form of historical protest. The suppressed past violently breaks through the chemical barriers of the brain, proving that the state's absolute control over history is an illusion. The return of these forgotten scenes shows that the historical traumas and experiences of the Global South cannot be swept under the rug by the advanced technologies of the West. The physical body functions as an unpoliced archive. It holds onto its true origins and cultural alignment even when the conscious mind has been forced to forget them, turning a medical failure into a powerful act of political defiance

6. The Case of Dr. Frank Sina: The Custodian Becomes the Afflicted:

The ultimate tragedy of this neuro-political system is most clearly seen through the character of Dr. Frank Sina. Frank is not a victim from the margins of society; he is a highly respected specialist whose career is dedicated to fixing memory leaks and protecting the state's illusions. He functions as an essential custodian of the regime's biopolitical project. When patients like Presley Smith suffer from historical flashes, Frank's job is to go into their minds, seal the leaks, and restore the fake, peaceful narratives created by the government. He views these leaks through a cold, clinical lens, treating them as mere technological errors that need to be corrected to maintain public safety.

However, Frank's detached position completely breaks down when he realizes that he cannot escape the system he serves. As he spends more time analyzing the fractured minds of his patients, the protective walls around his own consciousness begin to crumble. He looks into the broken memories of the migrants and starts seeing reflections of his own hidden past. Frank's official biography claims he had a peaceful, artistic childhood in a quiet northern town, but his body begins to rebel against this story. He starts experiencing a strange, unnamable sadness and physical reactions that do not match his happy memories.

Frank's identity crisis is deeply physical. His conscious brain tries to hold onto the state's illusions, but his body feels a deep, somatic connection to a forgotten past. He experiences a profound sense of alienation, famously realizing that he feels like a fictional character in a story written by someone else. This is the exact psychological trap that faces marginalized people who are forced to destroy their cultural history to fit into a dominant society. They might achieve material comfort and high status, but they remain permanently haunted by an unnamable, erased origin. When the doctor himself becomes a patient, Vassanji shows us that the biological erasure of belonging is an all-consuming system that eventually hollows out everyone, including the people who build it.

7. Conclusion:

M.G. Vassanji's *Nostalgia* offers a chilling, futuristic look at the ways in which modern power, global capitalism, and border control operate. By shifting his focus from the actual archives of the

South Asian diaspora to the speculative realm of neuro-technology, Vassanji does not leave postcolonial concerns behind. Instead, he warns us about a terrifying new reality where empires no longer just colonize physical land, but directly colonize the biological pathways of the human mind. The concept of the “Biological Erasure of Belonging” demonstrates that within this dystopian world, a person’s cultural roots and true memories are treated as dangerous political liabilities that must be clinically destroyed to create an obedient, consumerist population.

However, the novel ultimately offers a message of resistance. The biological failure of this memory control—manifested through Leaked Memory Syndrome—proves that human nature cannot be easily re-programmed like computer software. The state can erase conscious thoughts, but it cannot access the deep, cellular archive of the living body. The body keeps a record of its true history, its losses, and its ancestral connections.

For scholars working in postcolonial studies, diaspora literature, and memory studies, *Nostalgia* stands as a powerful critique of modern assimilation strategies that demand the total destruction of an immigrant’s past as the price for global inclusion. Vassanji reminds us that memory is the ultimate sanctuary of human dignity, and any attempt to build a perfect, tech-driven future by wiping away the historical footprints of the Global South is bound to shatter from its own internal psychological cracks.

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