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Refusing to Tell: Gender, Postcolonialism, and Withholding in M.G. Vassanji's *The Book of Secrets*

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M.G. Vassanji's enigmatic novel *The Book of Secrets* (1994) certainly lives up to its name. Compiled of textual scraps, including the colonial administrator Alfred Corbin's diary, the novel withholds many secrets, articulating a complex postcolonial vision while refusing closure on any number of issues, including its own narrative. Critically, the central mysteries of the text—including the paternity of Akber Ali (a.k.a. Aku or Ali), the identity of Mariamu's murderer, the nature of the relationships between Mariamu and several men, and narrator-historian Pius Fernandes's sexuality—all have gendered components. Yet while previous studies have examined the text in light of such concepts as postmodernism (Ball), history (Jones), memory (Simatei), and space (Romić), there has been no sustained feminist analysis of *The Book of Secrets* to date. The character Mariamu is particularly notable from a feminist perspective. Allegorically associated with Africa and conflated with the diary itself, Mariamu serves symbolic purposes in the text while also functioning as the key locus around which gendered power relations operate. By using a female character as an allegory for Africa, Vassanji panders to traditional colonial discourses that view the land as a feminine entity to be penetrated and conquered while also subverting those discourses through the process of withholding. In the text, Mariamu's silence is ambiguous: she often uses it as a means to protect herself, but her rape and murder indicate that this voicelessness is ultimately fatal. Her demise transforms her into an idol worshipped by her husband, Pipa, foregrounding the enigmatic power of the feminine made possible only in the absence of an actual female body. Moreover, Mariamu's silences and secrets occur against the background of competing masculinities that range from the hegemonic to the disruptive. Vassanji also deconstructs gender norms by suggesting a homoerotic relationship between two of the male main characters, thus furthering the case for reading *The Book of Secrets* from a postcolonial feminist perspective. By exploring gender issues and colonial discourses in complex and sometimes contradictory ways, Vassanji engages with recent debates in postcolonial feminist theory and provides a subtle and even covertly feminist revision of standard narratives of female victimization and exoticism. In turn, this allows for a reading that explores the text's undertheorized consideration of agency—one that suggests that,

in this novel, agency and silence are paradoxically articulated by and through one another.

The Book of Secrets is a multi-layered account of the fictionalized Shamsi Muslim community in East Africa; it spans a period of seventy-five years in which empires are built and dismantled, while weaving together various textual pieces to create an intricate narrative. The novel centres on Pius Fernandes, a retired schoolteacher who in 1988 finds a diary that once belonged to Alfred Corbin, a British colonial administrator who wrote his last entry in it in 1913. Through this framing device of "the book of our secrets" (1), we learn of the connections between Corbin, the "everyman" storekeeper Pipa, and Pipa's enigmatic wife Mariamu, who ultimately meets a tragic fate. Although the text freely makes use of postmodern conventions, particularly with respect to its status as historiographic metafiction, it ultimately seeks to articulate a nuanced and politicized postcolonial vision (Ball 90-99). I would like to suggest that *The Book of Secrets* also has a subtly conveyed feminist vision, primarily articulated though the representation of the character Mariamu. Scholars who have discussed Mariamu's representation and thematic function have interpreted her primarily in the way that the colonial administrator Alfred Corbin understands her: as a beautiful and mysterious presence whose silence only serves to reinforce her mystique, or simply as a victim. Amin Malak, for instance, grants Mariamu central importance in the text by referring to her as "the novel's pivotal point" (176), but he is constrained in his interpretation by his inability to see her as anything beyond an "enchanting, enigmatic figure" who is "rescue[d]" from a "harrowing exorcism" by Corbin (176). Biljana Romić laments that Mariamu's husband Pipa "finds himself cheated out of his wife's virginity on their wedding night" (76), envisioning a woman's virginity as a discreet prize to which the appropriate man is entitled. Shane Rhodes divides the text into two halves, roughly corresponding to the "narratives belonging to its two major characters, Corbin and Fernandes" (188), thus erasing the sections belonging to Rita (Fernandes's former student and the female character with the strongest voice) and Gregory (Fernandes's fellow teacher and the only queer character in the text), and considerably obscuring Mariamu's importance. Even the novel itself sometimes explicitly relegates Mariamu to the margins, such as when the narrator Fernandes introduces his text as a narrative of "the dark, passionate secret of a simple man whose life became painfully and inextricably linked with that of an English colonial officer" (8). He goes on to note that "the ephemeral tie between them—the tragic young woman Mariamu—would become the most tenacious bond of all" (8). In these ways, critics identify Mariamu either as a silent symbol or a minor character, marginalizing her central role in the novel's gendered concerns.

Mariamu's complex characterization is crucial to a gendered reading of *The Book of Secrets*, but the ways in which the text engages with colonial masculinity also reveal how gender hierarchies and colonial rule are enforced. As Anne McClintock points out, male European

colonizers are the "most direct agents of empire" (5), and Alfred Corbin's position engenders him with power and authority that expand beyond his status as an individual colonial administrator. Corbin may not be able to make laws ("My powers are modest" [30]), and he may even be a likable figure in some respects, but he still represents the ideological and physical violence inherent in empire building. Gender, of course, affects not only women, and Corbin's engagement with masculinity is a crucial part of his experience in Kikono, British East Africa (modern-day Kenya). As the area's ADC (Assistant District Commissioner), Corbin exemplifies the "white man's burden" as he takes on the paternalistic role of guiding, administering, and disciplining the local Shamsi community. The unapologetically violent enforcement of imperialism is enacted by Frank Maynard, a military captain who, when Corbin first encounters him, has been suspended for atrocities committed in a local village. Maynard's hegemonic masculinity contrasts with Corbin's less overtly performative masculinity, but Corbin realizes that it is the threat of violence from men like Maynard that allows the colonial project to occur: "I cannot help thinking that if the blacks in my caravan decide to butcher me and my Indian, it would be Maynard or someone like him who would be sent to avenge us" (24). This passage reveals Corbin's deeply ingrained distrust of racial Others and his propensity to claim ownership over them ("my Indian," for instance). It also suggests that violent men like Maynard are not aberrations or sick individuals operating outside of colonial law, but that they are a fundamental feature of that very law. Maynard acknowledges these two overlapping approaches to colonial rule when he suggests that Corbin's less violent methods will be appropriate "when [he's] cleaned up and subdued the land for [Corbin] to administer" (21). Here, Maynard is positioned as the pinnacle of virulent and aggressive masculinity, while Corbin represents himself in his diary as a more benevolent masculine force who gently guides the natives into submission.

These competing masculinities provide the background against which the complex characterization of the Shamsi character Mariamu is articulated. In the novel's first section, based on Corbin's diary and Fernandes's supplements to it, Mariamu is presented through the male gaze and filtered through a number of masculine colonialist tropes. Unsurprisingly, Corbin views Mariamu as exotic, bold, and highly sexualized, with "an indifferent even arrogant smile" (43) on her lips. Her status as temptress is most evident when her headscarf falls from her face, indicating a transgression of boundaries, and when she refuses to break eye contact with him: "She stood tall, her red pachedi having fallen on her shoulders, revealing her long thick black hair, her eyes dark and deep—a vagrant with the bearing of a queen, as she refused to turn away a second time" (77). Ironically, it is Corbin who traps Mariamu into revealing herself in this way by ambushing her, yet he projects his own fantasies of transgression upon her. Mariamu is here positioned as a temptress, but the most enduring and articulated trope that is used to interpret her is the association between her body and the landscape. *The Book of Secrets*

exemplifies how the tropes of "discovery" and "settlement" are colonial myths, rooted in masculine ideologies that demand mastery and penetration of a feminized "virgin" land. Although Africa has already been "discovered" and "settled" by the time Corbin arrives, many of the conventions of colonial writings on these subjects still resonate. "From the beginning of the colonial period till its end (and beyond)," Ania Loomba writes, "female bodies symbolize the conquered land" (152). In 1595, Sir Walter Raleigh famously wrote that "Guiana is a countrey that hath yet her maydenhead" (qtd. in Montrose 12), making the virgin woman / virgin land connection explicit. Anne McClintock reminds us that "within patriarchal narratives, to be virgin is to be empty of desire and void of sexual agency, passively awaiting the thrusting, male insemination of history, language, and reason" (30), thereby highlighting the important consideration that sexuality is both a metaphor and a reality in colonial history.

In *The Book of Secrets*, one of Corbin's early musings on Africa connects the metaphorically and literally sexualized components that McClintock emphasizes:

> It was impossible to surrender to sleep with the knowledge that finally I was entering the interior of Africa … the huge and dark continent that had defied the rest of the world for millennia, now opening up to European civilization, to a great Empire of which I was a minor but privileged functionary. "Life and soul," Mr. Churchill had said. My body had blistered in the heat and swelled to the bites of insects, and as I lay on the most uncomfortable bunk the Uganda Railway possessed, my soul was stirring. (23)

In imagining Africa as a "dark continent" (the same way that Freud conceptualized women's sexuality), Corbin perhaps unconsciously invokes sexual images ("entering the interior," "opening up"), demonstrating their insidiousness in colonial discourse. Patrick Brantlinger has shown how the myth of Africa as the "dark continent" developed in Britain during the historical transition from the abolition of slavery in 1833 to the imperialist division of Africa that occurred in the late nineteenth century. Based primarily on reports by explorers and missionaries as well as fictional representations, Bratlinger argues that Britain's notions of superiority were reinforced by constructing Africa as "savage," cruel, and dangerous, thus justifying the imperial project. McClintock takes an explicitly gender-conscious view of these issues as she discusses the long tradition of imagining and representing the "discovered" landscape as virgin female territory. Drawing on previous discourses that understood both women and nature as entities to be subdued, male explorers and colonial officials engaged in conquest in its multiple connotations. Not only did many explorers conceive of the land as a feminine entity to be mastered, but they also imagined the land's inhabitants—already a problem because they were residing in newly "discovered" territory—as radically incomprehensible. Africa and African women in particular were often depicted as savage and highly sexualized,

justifying both sexual exploitation and imperial rule. According to McClintock, "Africa and the Americas had become what can be called a porno-tropics for the European imagination—a fantastic magic lantern of the mind onto which Europe projected its forbidden sexual desires and fears" (22). In a famous drawing by Jan van der Straet, Vespucci's "discovery" of America is allegorically represented through a nude female lying on a hammock, roused from her slumber by a fully dressed Vespucci who has just come ashore, bearing a flag and other marks of "civilization" (Montrose 2-4). Reading this drawing, Louis Montrose convincingly argues that multiple emblems of "belief, empirical knowledge, and violence" converge as America is interpellated into being (4). Both the female and the land are positioned as ripe for plunder and possession, providing justification and direction for the colonial enterprise.

The "persistent gendering of the imperial unknown" (McClintock 24) is evident in the conflation of women and "virgin" territory as well as in the angel of progress and truth who brings salvation and civilization to the natives. That civilizing and converting forces in *The Book of Secrets* are represented by two white women, Miss Elliott and Mrs. Bailey, is no accident, as white womanhood was often considered to be the ultimate antidote to the monstrous femininity of the colonial Other. As Vron Ware has put it in a discussion of the allegedly enlightening powers of white femininity for the colonizing mission, "British women had a unique duty to bring civilization to the uncivilized" (127). In this colonial fantasy, according to McClintock, women become "the boundary markers of empire" (24) that male colonial agents seek to contain and neutralize. McClintock asserts that "in myriad ways, women served as mediating and threshold figures by means of which men oriented themselves in space, as agents of power and agents of knowledge" (24). She goes on to note that on one hand, to characterize the land as a feminine entity to be penetrated and contained is clearly a trope of domination and exploitation. On the other hand, this act reflects "male anxiety and paranoia about boundary loss" (McClintock 24) and emasculation in the face of an unknown entity (i.e., the vast, dark, dangerous continent) that could annihilate them. McClintock argues that the "erotics of engulfment" (24) is in many ways a "traumatic trope" (24) intended to compensate for fears of disorder and obliteration. In *The Book of Secrets*, Corbin's first glimpse of Mariamu solidifies her sexualized conflation with the African landscape and anticipates his involvement with her. On the train to Kikono, Corbin sees

> fleeting glimpses caught between bush and tree and anthill—a figure draped in white, dashing from left to right, cutting across his path in the distance. It could have been a man in kanzu but for the black hair flying, the lithe movement, the nimble step … then a red head-cover over the hair to complete the female figure. So amazed was he by the sight that he had stopped to watch. She disappeared behind an incline, where he was told lay the settlement …. (28)

In the liminal space of the train, Corbin begins his infatuation with both Mariamu and the African landscape, here described as being intertwined

with one another. Although Corbin seems to have no clearly predatory feelings towards Mariamu at this point, his interest in both her and the community anticipates his later need to control both. Corbin's observations fit within a colonial discourse that constructs white men as active agents and the land/woman as passive canvas.

In addition to being implicated in the trope of the feminized landscape, Mariamu is a character caught in a web of gendered power relations that extend beyond her status as symbol. The question that Fernandes's former student Feroz asks, "What is history, sir?" (4) and Rita's claim that "you can't know everything about the past" (294) encapsulate one important strand of the novel:the fragmentary and incomplete nature of the historical record. However, this narrative thread threatens to erase the importance of Mariamu as a character if "history" is only understood as "his-story." Mariamu's story is interesting for a variety of reasons, including the way in which it demonstrates asymmetrical gender relations occurring in different groups. One important historical element in the text is the way in which patriarchal power both stems from colonialism and pre-exists colonialism. Mariamu's virginity is associated with the untouched terrain in the colonizer's lexicon, but it is also fetishized by the male colonial subject. Imagining his wedding night, Pipa places himself in a position of power: "Tonight I'll be the teacher, he thought, recalling an analogy given [to] him earlier that evening. I'll be the teacher, and teach by inflicting a little pain. This is how it has to be, how it always is. He felt magnanimous in his manly gentleness and consideration" (104-05). The "soiled sheet" becomes the "banner of [Pipa's] triumph or *shame*" (105) on Mariamu and Pipa's wedding night, essentially objectifying Mariamu's sexuality. Although the Shamsi women appear to be complicit in this degrading ritual, they are disadvantaged by it as well. The virginity requirement operates in a gender hierarchy that makes no such claim on men. Mariamu is positioned in other complex ways that foreground the fluid nature of femininity. As Corbin's housekeeper, she makes perfect chapattis and cooks much better than Corbin's anglicized servant Thomas. In this way, Mariamu becomes less the exotic Other and more the reflection of a good English housewife. Ania Loomba notes how the "figure of the 'other woman' haunts the colonial imagination in ambivalent, often contradictory ways" (157) because she is defined in terms of barbarism but also represents colonial fantasies of ideal feminine behaviour. Loomba uses the example of sati to illustrate this point: colonial agents viewed the burning widow as proof of Indian brutality, but her demise also invoked fantasies of the ideal wife who recognizes her existence as worthless without her husband (157). Mariamu's death could also be read as a type of sati-like sacrifice to patriarchal notions of women's sexuality: her sexual assault would have labelled her as "damaged," but her violent death absolves her husband from the "shame" of having a wife who has been raped.

Mariamu is not only valued for her sexuality and domestic labour, but she is also positioned as an object of exchange that facilitates relations

between men. As Stephanie Jones points out, in marrying Mariamu, Pipa solidifies his tenuous claim to the Shamsi community, including their rituals, network, and history (76). Pipa's marriage to Mariamu is supposed to guarantee the male line, but the hint of compromised paternity subverts this expectation. After Pipa discovers (or thinks he discovers) that Mariamu is not a virgin on their wedding night, Mariamu's stepfather, Rashid, claims that he saw Mariamu in Corbin's bed (88). This accusation, important in terms of Pipa's "rights" to a virgin female, also has implications for the paternity of the couple's son, Ali. In symbolic terms, who inseminates the colonial female is a crucial concern, and it leads to a crisis of origins. In patriarchal patterns of kinship and descent, the man's name is intended as a guarantee of patrimony because "his gestative status is not guaranteed" (McClintock 29). Any child born to a woman is clearly hers, but in a time before DNA testing, paternity could never be certain. This biological situation is reflected in the colloquial adage, "mama's baby, papa's maybe." Claims to paternity reflect anxieties about female sexuality and racial purity, which are often connected, and they also relate to the way in which woman-as-nation is expected to reproduce itself in a specific image. Here, national, racial, and gendered patterns of reproduction are confused and subverted because of the mystery surrounding Ali's paternity. Amin Malak makes an important point about the symbolic resonances of Ali's heritage:

> Significantly, Ali's mongrelized triple parentage, together with his subsequent triple marriages, symbolizes the three sources of cultural identity for the novel's Indian Muslim community in East [Africa] (the Isma'ilis, fictionally referred to here as the Shamsis): Asia, through historical roots and religion; Africa, through settlement and trade; and Britain, through education and colonial affiliation. (176)

By withholding the identity of Ali's father, Vassanji keeps the paternity of the postcolonial son a mystery. That there was "only a trickle" (105) of blood following the consummation on Mariamu and Pipa's wedding night does not determine whether or not Mariamu was a virgin, and the fact that Ali is born "fair and had grey eyes" (156) does not prove he is Corbin's son, according to the mukhi, the boy's great-uncle. Mariamu remains decidedly silent on the issue, neither confirming nor denying Pipa's allegations that the child may be Corbin's. Malak and other critics have overlooked the possibility that Ali's father could be Mariamu's stepfather, Rashid (nicknamed "Simba"), a non-Shamsi former railway coolie. It seems clear in the text that Rashid is involved with Mariamu in some way, since the community's spiritual leader (who is also Mariamu's uncle) notes that Rashid is "a very protective father. He's fond of the girl – perhaps too fond" (50). Rashid also apparently has Mariamu commit unspecified "evil acts" (81, 92) while under the influence of spirits, and he repeatedly follows her around Kikono, all indicating a controlling relationship, if not an outright abusive one. Rashid's exertion of power over Mariamu illuminates the ways in which patriarchal power both emerges from and pre-exists colonialism. Regardless of the identity of

Ali's father, the crux of the matter is that the obsession with paternity reflects asymmetrically gendered power systems that privilege the male line. Maternity lines are important as well, as evidenced when Pipa's second wife Remti utters the expected phrase "I don't want the child of 'that woman' in my home" (200), but her proclamation does not carry the same cultural weight, especially given that Ali does eventually live with her family.

That Mariamu is valued for her ability to produce male heirs (an expectation she subverts) is clear when Pipa ceases to worship Corbin's diary, said to contain Mariamu's spirit (172), upon the birth of his son Amin. Pipa's idolization of the diary foregrounds the way in which the feminine is worshipped only in the absence of an actual female body. Mariamu is figured as the diary, and Pipa worships the object at a shrine that incorporates both Hindu and Muslim symbols, as Vassanji has noted is common in the Ismaili Muslim sect (Fisher 51). "Mariamu" is an Africanized Muslim name for Jesus' mother (Malak 179), adding further layers of religious symbolism. As a ghost that lives on through the diary, Mariamu is essentially beyond history, refusing the conventional boundaries that assume the past should stay in the past. Her presence continues to haunt the novel's later sections after her story is essentially finished because she becomes conflated with Corbin's diary itself. The diary is a narrative device that forms the impetus for the story; the "story of the book itself" (7) is a crucial aspect of narrative momentum. It is also positioned in other complex ways. In the arena of historical evidence, a diary is considered to be an exceptional window on the past (particularly for feminist historians [see Huff, for example]), but the novel demonstrates that this assumption is problematic. Pipa believes that the diary contains the answers to all of the mysteries that Mariamu embodied, but he falsely assumes that his illiteracy is the only barrier to understanding Mariamu and his past. While the diary allows him to commune with Mariamu's spirit, it, like Mariamu in life, has secrets that it refuses to relinquish. Ironically, Pipa appears to have a more intimate relationship with Mariamu in death than he did during her lifetime. Because the diary is unreadable and the female body is absent, Pipa is able to use it and Mariamu's memory as a *tabula rasa* upon which he can project his fears and desires.

Mariamu comes to possess the diary apparently through theft, and if she did in fact steal the journal from Corbin, this move indicates a bid to gain some control over a narrative that threatens to obliterate her. Malak reads the supposed theft of the diary as an oppositional move when he writes, "this gesture on the part of the illiterate, silent subaltern represents a daring, subversive act that symbolically signifies a form of resistance, retrieval, and appropriation of the tools of the dominant discourse whose codes are to be deciphered a generation later" (177-78). This argument is certainly reflected on the first page of the novel when the narrator asserts that if Corbin's diary were stolen, the colonized subjects could "take back [their] souls, [their] secrets from him" (1). The only problem with this

interpretation is that Malak takes the claim that Mariamu stole the diary at face value. Pipa certainly believes that Mariamu stole the diary from Corbin, but he also improbably concludes that it is her "gift" (172) to him to show that "she had chosen him over that other" (204), ironically making himself the centre of the event even though the diary was clearly hidden from him. It is true that Pipa finds the diary in Mariamu's possession after her murder, and Corbin claims many years later that it was stolen, but this evidence does not preclude the conclusion that Mariamu obtained the diary through other means (e.g., Corbin could have given it to her). How the diary wound up in Mariamu's possession opens up thorny questions of complicity, agency, and coercion. Did she steal it? If so, why? Did she believe it contained her secrets or even her soul? Was it a self-conscious act of resistance? Was it an attempt to hide her unfaithfulness? Regardless of the answer, the recognition of Mariamu's agency is critical to a feminist reading of the text.

The question of agency is a "tension both within and around postcolonial theory" (Williams and Chrisman 6). As an Indian/African woman negotiating her multiple positioning in patriarchal and colonial discourses, Mariamu possesses a sense of agency that is mediated and restricted by such institutions as the family and colonialism. Her ability to speak and be heard therefore risks being interpreted in a very limiting fashion. In the well-known essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?," Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak addresses the question of agency of those at the bottom of the social hierarchy. Considering gender along with class, Spivak concludes:

> [B]oth as object of colonialist historiography and as subject of insurgency, the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant. If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow. (82-83)

Spivak understands that agency is an effect of discourse, and she recognizes that women in particular are unable to shape discourse in a system of representation that privileges men and masculinity. As John McLeod succinctly puts it, "Spivak complicates the extent to which women's voices can be easily retrieved and restored to history" (194). In a subsequent interview with Donna Landry and Gerald MacLean in *The Spivak Reader*, Spivak clarifies some of the more oblique aspects of her essay, acknowledging that the term "speak" is ambiguous, and revealing that she is actually more concerned with the act of listening. If a subaltern does speak, according to Spivak, her utterance "would have to be interpreted in the way we historically interpret anything" (291). In other words, the subaltern's speech would still be interpreted through preexisting conceptual frameworks that would preclude understanding.

Mariamu's agency is positioned in ambivalent ways that construct her as both an actor and one who is acted upon, as one who has access to speech and one who is silenced. The text contrasts Mariamu with other women who have somewhat less ambiguous relationships to their own

agency. Khanoum, the African grandmother who helps raise Ali, is strongly maternal and described in terms of her caretaking abilities, but her agency is limited to influencing the boy's upbringing. Rita, the Indian woman who plays out a "Dollywood" (252) fantasy with Ali in Dar es Salaam, is a strong female character whose agency is clear and direct: she pursues a relationship with Ali and acts as a key informant to Fernandes as he reconstructs the fragmentary narrative. Mariamu, on the other hand, is viewed as unnatural and unruly by the Shamsi community: "The girl is wild" (50), according to the mukhi. Later he asserts that "[s]he had always had strange ways" (70). The community views her as deviant partially because of her supposed communion with spirits. Arguably, some of her deviance and some of the ambiguity surrounding her agency stems from her status as a hybridized Indian/African woman. Feminist scholarship has studied the Indian woman and the African woman, but sometimes multiracial identities not involving Westerners receive less scholarly attention. In the novel, the figure of the Indian/African woman functions as a means of extending feminist postcolonial discourses to new kinds of hybrid identities. Vassanji signals this shift through his representation of Mariamu's agency as complex and multifaceted; he writes her as one who makes decisions about her own existence, yet he refuses to give voice to her in many ways. It is notable, for instance, that Mariamu approaches Corbin with food, making her the agent at the beginning of their relationship, yet she also refuses to condemn the community for "exorcizing" her evil spirits through extreme violence. Rather than making Mariamu a mouthpiece to condemn all the wrongs done by both colonizers and the colonized, Vassanji paradoxically demonstrates Mariamu's agency by having her use her silences strategically.

Mariamu resists simple categorization in terms of her agency, and the text acknowledges the difficulties in giving voice to her experiences. Corbin eventually forms a relatively close relationship with her, sharing confidences and noting that "he had never talked to anyone of her race like this before" (80). Although Corbin insists they have a "rapport" (79), the text reveals very little of their actual conversations. Moreover, Corbin is baffled by Mariamu's multiple identities:

> I do not know what to make of her—the impetuous girl who walked in past my askari and spoke directly to me, then the silent girl who left chapattis for me on Thursdays, the girl humiliated by the maalim's switch, the proud girl holding her uncovered head high and staring directly at me, and now the quiet and shy housekeeper. Which is the real one? (78-79)

Because Mariamu refuses to become a two-dimensional figure easily interpreted in the colonial schema, she remains a mystery to various men in the text. Pipa expresses a nearly identical sentiment when he observes Mariamu and then interprets her as unknowable: "'One day you will tell me all about yourself,' he said. She looked away, deferential, shy, quiet. To him she would always be a mystery" (146). Interestingly, Pipa reads Mariamu's silence as "deferential, shy, quiet" rather than defiant,

strategic, or resistant, foregrounding the ways in which silence is an unstable political strategy. Mariamu's silence protects her at various times, especially from Pipa's allegations of infidelity and constant questioning both before and after her death, but her rape and murder represent a horrendous type of silencing that renders her completely voiceless.

Mariamu's ultimate silencing represents an affront to her agency, but it also an interesting move on Vassanji's part to query gendered representations. As John Clement Ball points out, "refus[ing] closure by hoarding some of [a text's] secrets and declining to resolve contradictions" (90) is a postmodern technique, but in this case, it is also a political move. Ball suggests that what cannot be known is not the "main point or achievement" (94) of the novel and I agree, but I would also suggest that from a feminist perspective, what is not revealed is crucial to the text's gender politics. The decision to silence the text's central female character could be read as a blind spot on Vassanji's part, but it could also be read in more overtly feminist ways. According to Shane Rhodes, the text "has us understand that historiography, regardless of its claims to objectivity, is always a fictional process of mastery over a silent and mute body of knowledge, a body that must be simultaneously invaded and conquered" (180). Without explicitly discussing the gendered components of his claims, Rhodes articulates the position of Mariamu as that body. Rhodes argues that the diary becomes the "dark continent" invaded by Fernandes (180), and I would point out that the diary is also conflated with Mariamu, who is in turn conflated with the African continent. This adds a further dimension of frontier crossing to the text, where the notions of past and present, as well as civilized and uncivilized, are already in question (Rhodes 181). Here, silence is posited not as the binary opposite of agency, but as a form of agency, because it can be employed strategically. Moreover, the text's withholding can be read as a form of resistance to Western narrative structures that demand certain conventions. Trinh T. Minh-ha discusses these structures in *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism*. Minh-ha argues that to be considered "good," a story must conform to ready-made conventions, including beginning, climax, and resolution, which she sees as "a set of prefabricated schemata (prefabricated by whom?) [that Western audiences] value out of habit, conservatism, and ignorance (of other ways of telling and listening to stories)" (142). Considering that Vassanji is a two-time winner of the prestigious Giller Prize, it seems that novels such as *The Book of Secrets* with their absence of a tidy resolution are increasingly appreciated by literary audiences.

The Book of Secrets's lack of resolution not only cements its status as historiographic metafiction, but it also provides a clear impetus for a feminist reading of the novel. As Anne McClintock so aptly puts it,

> All too often, Enlightenment metaphysics presented knowledge as a relation of power between two gendered spaces, articulated by a journey and a technology of

> conversion: the male penetration and exposure of a veiled, female interior; and the aggressive conversion of its "secrets" into a visible, male science of the surface. (23)

In *The Book of Secrets*, this racialized penetration is uncertain: did Corbin and Mariamu have sexual relations? If so, did Corbin rape Mariamu? Would any kind of consensual relationship between a white employer and his non-white housekeeper be possible under the constraints of patriarchal colonialism? Critically, the text's many secrets are never revealed. Mariamu's association with the land becomes an important means by which Vassanji critiques the trope of the explicitly sexualized and feminized moment of "discovery" and "settlement" in the framework of postcolonial feminist theory. By revealing the paternity of Mariamu's child, Vassanji would have allowed the gender politics in the text to be solely a metaphor for the birth of the postcolonial nation. If, according to McClintock, the feminizing of the land is both a "poetics of ambivalence and a politics of violence" (28), then refusing to carry the metaphor through to its logical conclusion (by not revealing the father of the postcolonial son) is an act of resistance. By remaining unknown and unknowable, Mariamu is never fully incorporated into the search for historic authenticity or the patriarchal search for origins. In this way, Vassanji injects a subversively feminist element into a text that already challenges many of the grand notions of the twentieth century, including the linearity and coherence of history and the intimate workings of empire, and suggests that withholding can function as a political strategy.

The Book of Secrets' contribution to postcolonial modes of resistance has been debated in the criticism on the novel. Peter Simatei claims that Vassanji "is not interested in constructing a discourse overtly oppositional to the colonial one" (32), partly because of the position held by East Africans of Indian descent in a stratified colonial system that granted them more privileges than the native Africans. Amin Malak, on the other hand, reads clear postcolonial resistance in the text, arguing that the novel "makes its intervention by cleverly creating a colonial text, taking the form of a diary, the titular book of secrets, and then situating it within a context that foregrounds the limitations of the colonial perspective without necessarily condemning it outright" (175). Although *The Book of Secrets* is a complex enough text that it could be interpreted from a variety of standpoints, I tend to agree with Malak's argument that the text contains some subversive elements, particularly in terms of feminist concerns. These elements also include the hint of an illicit same-sex love affair.

Pius Fernandes's relationship to poet and fellow teacher Richard Gregory is another major unsolved mystery in the text, working to interrogate gendered power relations while also troubling notions of compulsory heterosexuality. Fernandes refers to their relationship as "a long friendship I could never quite explain" (233), indicating either his blindness to his own desires, his reluctance to reveal his own secrets, or both. Both teachers at the Shamsi Boys' School (nicknamed "Boyschool" [240]) in Dar es Salaam, Fernandes and Gregory form a relationship based

on their shared isolation and outsider status, Fernandes as a Goanese Indian and Gregory as a white British male. Fernandes muses, "there was between the two of us—Gregory and me—the friendship of two men thrown together by fate who were reasonably tolerant … and, if I may flatter myself, saw the humanness in each other" (274-75). Late in the novel Rita informs Fernandes, "your friendship with him was rather peculiar to us girls. Gregory was a homosexual, as you know. Gay, he would be called today" (297). Gossip surrounds Gregory's relationship with his favourite students, "whose truth [Fernandes] never tried to ascertain" (268). Although it is perfectly reasonable for a teacher to have friendships with students, the threat of deviant sexuality makes such relationships suspect. This is particularly ironic given that Fernandes actually is attracted to his female student, Rita, but his love is unrequited. The text remains silent on the possibility of an affair between Fernandes and Gregory, but the potential relationship mirrors the suspicions surrounding Corbin and Mariamu years previously. A same-sex relationship between a Goanese Indian and an exiled white British man would have massive implications for the gender politics in the text, but the question, like so many others, is left unanswered. Fernandes's final encounter with Gregory, when he holds the dying man in his arms (310), is significant for its poignancy and tenderness; if there was no sexual relationship between the two men, there was clearly a strong emotional bond. This staging of masculinity contrasts sharply with the previous representations of Corbin, Maynard, and Pipa, who have strong investments in emotional restraint and other "manly" attributes. Rather than revealing the truth behind the gossip, Fernandes posits this narrative strand as simply another of life's mysteries: "There are questions that have no answer; we can never know the innermost secrets of any heart" (297). In this way, Vassanji extends the tropes of silencing and agency to other figures who may have something to lose by speaking. If he were to reveal a same-sex affair, Fernandes would make himself vulnerable to job termination, discrimination, harassment, or worse. It is significant that Gregory renounces his British passport to live in the newly independent Tanzania, suggesting that queer sexuality has no place in dominant Western discourses, and that Vassanji at least allows for the possibilities of alternative sexualities by introducing Gregory as a character.

In *The Book of Secrets*, gender is associated with secrets, withholding, and all that cannot be revealed. This alignment of gender and incomprehensible mystery is potentially dangerous, as it risks marginalizing Mariamu and other voices deemed deviant or suspect, such as that of the gay poet Gregory. However, by withholding information, Vassanji not only refuses a voyeuristic focus on Mariamu's suffering, but he also refuses to turn Mariamu into a metaphor for the landscape or to perpetuate the patriarchal obsession with male lineage. Through this feminist revision of standard colonialist discourses, Vassanji demonstrates agency's paradoxical and complicated relationship with silence and speech. A postcolonial feminist reading of *The Book of Secrets* can

remobilize familiar and damaging tropes in complex and surprising ways in order to demonstrate their constructedness, make visible their continued perpetuation, and reverse their damaging effects. Rather than abandoning the gendered representations that have long oppressed women, the text is able to subvert the tropes that objectify and silence women, opening up complex questions of agency around the ability to speak and be heard. Fernandes, as narrator, reminds us that "ultimately this story is the teller's, mine" (92), and it is evident that *The Book of Secrets* is not only Mariamu's story. However, by examining Mariamu in the light of notably gendered tropes, we can read her as more than a victim and thus reveal the complexity of Vassanji's novel. This reading of *The Book of Secrets* furthers the continuing project of asserting the critical role of gender in colonialist discourse while avoiding the fallacies of a universal feminist sisterhood or simple narratives of victimization. Mariamu's characterization reminds us that the relationship between silencing and agency is such that even if marginalized people attempt to exert control over their own existence, powerful forces may prevent that agency through silencing. Yet paradoxically, Vassanji most forcefully represents Mariamu's agency in *The Book of Secrets* through silence. In theorizing the ambivalent relationship between silence and agency, agency is thus reconceptualized from simply the ability to act to a more complex configuration that suggests that withholding secrets is actually liberating in certain contexts.

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