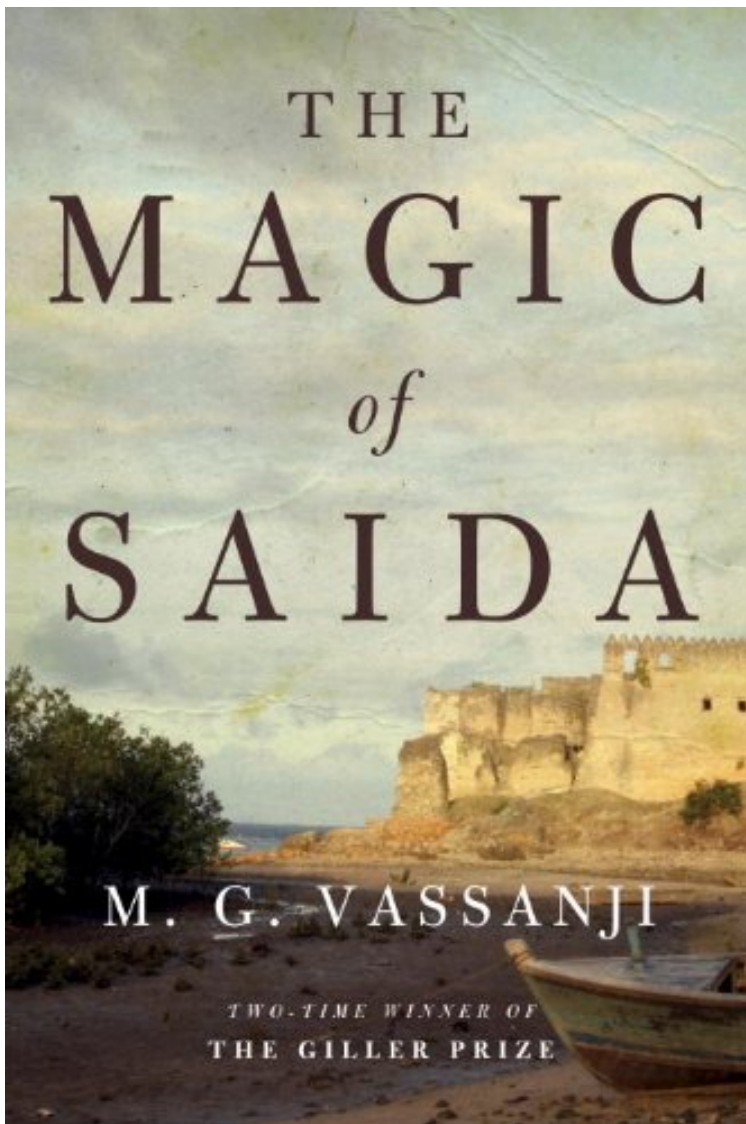


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The Magic of Saida



Par M.G. Vassanji
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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurThe Magic of Saida tells the haunting story of Kamal, a successful Canadian doctor who, in middle age and after decades in North America, decides to return to his homeland of East Africa to find his childhood sweetheart, Saida. Kamal's journey is motivated by a combination of guilt, hope, and the desire to unravel the mysteries of his childhood--mysteries compounded by the fact that Kamal is the son of an absent Indian father from a well-to-do family and a Swahili African mother of slave ancestry. Through a series of flashbacks, we watch Kamal's early years in the ancient coastal town of Kilwa, where he grows up in a world of poverty but also of poetry, sustained by his friendship with the magical Saida.This world abruptly ends when Kamal is sent away by his mother to live with his father's family in the city. There, the academically gifted boy grows up as a "dark Indian," eventually going to university and departing for

Canada. Left behind to her traditional fate is Saida, now a beautiful young woman. Decades later, Kamal's guilt pulls him back to Kilwa . . . where we discovers what happened to Saida during a harrowing night of sinister rites. This complex, revelatory, sweeping and shocking book, is a towering testament to the magical literary powers of M.G. Vassanji. Extrait Prologue

He came to my notice quite by accident one afternoon, when I overheard a nurse tell the receptionist at the city hospital about a curious patient who had been brought in in a state of delirium early that morning. He had been ranting all sorts of crazy things, the nurse put it, adding, This ones headed for the madhouse, for sure. What sort of crazy things? Eti, a poet was hanged in Kilwa, after he wrote a letter to Mecca, and you will like this there is a lover, beautiful like a mermaid, called Kinjikitil... High laughter rippled merrily down the hallway on this otherwise depleted Sunday afternoon. I happened to be visiting an old colleague of mine, and on my way out had paused at the station to make an inquiry. And this bit of hospital gossip awoke some nerve in me and not because Kinjikitil, as every child in school learns, was the name of a man, the prophet who inspired the great War of the Waters against the Germans in this country a century ago. It was the reference to the poet that had caught my breath. He could only be Mzee Omari Tamim, one of our preeminent bards, found hanged from Kilwa's equally famous mango tree, sometime during the 1960s. The townspeople, not satisfied with the police verdict of suicide, engaged a renowned sorcerer to solve the case. The verdict: murder by a djinn. I happen to know that the case was deemed politically embarrassing to our young nation and was hushed up. I am a publisher by profession, and in my field discoveries are what one lives for. It was also through casual hearsay that some years ago I discovered the manuscript of a Swahili novel, possibly the first one ever written. For me, a sensation; a financial failure nevertheless. But its what I do, nosing around after stories, from Oyster Bay to Kariakoo, Dar es Salaam to Mwanza. In that pursuit, I admit, I sometimes forget the occasion. Take me to this curious patient, I told the nurse. He was called Kamal Punja, the nurse informed me on our way to his room. That Indian name belied his appearance when I saw him, which was very evidently that of an African. He was a big man, lying on his back, his hair partly grey. His breathing was quick and audible, his pallor a deep ashen, and his lined, fleshy face had the look of a man worried by his sleep. A young man and woman sat beside him, the one towards the middle, the other at the head, and turned out to be his son and daughter. I assumed it was they who had brought the expensive roses by the window. I felt sorry for them. The girl was as thin as a reed, the boy big boned and muscular; in their North American accents they were attempting to convince Dad that he was not well and should return home to Edmonton to be looked after. It occurred to me briefly that they were not used to such unhappy scenes; they were in their early twenties. There was one other person in the room, a young woman present in a consular capacity, and she left as soon as I arrived. Visiting time was over, Sister Felicity announced, and the girl and boy left, promising to be back the next day. The nurse, with a knowing look at me, also departed, closing the door behind her, and I was alone with the patient, who had turned his head and was staring at me. Hello, I said and stepped closer to his bed. Who are you? The voice fragile, the look tired. The large eyes alarmingly bloodshot. There was a small growth of beard at the chin, and the nose, I noticed, was fleshy without being broad. I am Martin Kigoma, a publisher. I am visiting a friend here and I heard about you from the nurse. You seem to have had a wild experience. Having pulled up the chair vacated by his son, I watched him somewhat warily. I had already been apprised by the nurse that he was a medical doctor from Canada, and had been flown in from Kilwa in an emergency. He had been pumped for an overdose, based on the diagnosis that accompanied him. He needed help, that face seemed to signal, and it was not just of the medical sort and, I hasten to add, this was not the opportunistic observation of a predatory publisher with a need to make a comeback. How do you feel now, Doctor? I asked with concern. Woozy, he answered, and twitched an arm in an attempt to raise it. Confused. You see, Ive been poisoned by a mixture of hallucinogenic drugs... plant extracts... make you talk and talk... make you see things... I noticed from his accent that he must have left these parts a long time ago. At this time I also had the feeling that he seemed familiar, and I'd seen that face in perhaps its younger days. This happens sometimes, with people showing up on our streets after long absences abroad. And so my empathy for him was all the greater. The nurse said I began, then switched tack. What took you to Kilwa? Did you go on a holiday? He didnt reply. A deathly quiet descended upon us, in that bleak, spare cubicle. His head had fallen back and his eyes were shut, and it seemed that in his struggle with himself he had lost consciousness; but after some minutes as I prepared to leave he suddenly spoke, as though in his sleep. Kinjikitil. I came on a mission, to find her... to keep my promise. I told you I would return, and I came. Its not too late... not too late. I stood up Sister Felicity was at the door with a firm look, bidding me to leave. I put my hand on his arm and asked him, Shall I come to see

you again? Do, he said, turning ever so slightly towards me now. And to my great surprise, added, Please. I need to find out... I will return, I assured him, kindly. I turned to go, and as I reached the door, he said, Martin... that's your name... do you believe in magic? I don't know, I would have told him; yes and no, but probably no... He wouldn't have heard me, for he had drifted off. I left the hospital deeply affected. It is rare to be provoked to such pity, and to such a sense of mystery. As I drove along Ocean Road in my old jalopy, the beach to my left crowded with visitors this bright late afternoon, expensive leisure vehicles parked to either side of me, I wondered at the nightmares of the man I had just left in his sickbed. An African with a very Indian name, a look of utter desolation on his face, making obscure historical references in his ravings while admitting to a drugged state. Calling on a woman with an impossible name. Do you believe in magic?

Many people do, to this day. Some instinct drew me back to the hospital late that night on my way home from a party, to discover that the patient's condition had worsened. His son and daughter had been called and were waiting outside his room in the open corridor, sitting on the floor, leaning against the wall, looking lost and dejected and half asleep. Inside, there was some commotion, which seemed the louder for the utter stillness all around, against the background of a cricket chorus in the garden before us and the gentle wash of the ocean tide coming in across the road from the hospital. What happened? I asked. Before they could answer, the medical resident and a nurse emerged, and I repeated my question. He has high fever, the doctor said. He should be all right. We're running tests. Can he go back to Canada for treatment? the daughter asked.

Both the kids had now stood up. He can't be moved until he's stable, the doctor said testily, then went on kindly, He will be all right. This is a modern hospital, and we have the most qualified staff. It is likely that your father has a tropical malady, for which this would be the better place for treatment. He turned to me for confirmation and I nodded briefly. I stepped inside the room. Kamal Punja lay on his bed breathing deeply and looking ghastly, the dim overhead lamp having rendered his sweat-drenched face weirdly electric, like that of a lit-up zombie. A nurse stood by the bed working with an IV drip. His daughter behind me gave a sob and I put an arm around her. There we left him, and I drove the boy and girl to their hotel, not far away, where we all had some tea in the bar. They became chatty and talked about their father and their life back in

Canada. It's hard to imagine him here, said Hanif. Like I can't believe that he grew up here in these same streets. There was a silence, before his sister Karima looked up. Yes, I find it hard too. Did he often talk about his childhood? I asked. They nodded. Especially when we were little, the girl said. How could he leave, just like that? the boy responded, slowly and bitterly. Abandon us and everything... Now this... It took him a week to recover. He was treated for malaria, finally, the two attending physicians disregarding the previous diagnosis of a drug overdose. There was malaria parasite in his blood, and who was to quibble; no point in reporting to the triumphant medicos the patient's own corroboration, albeit made in a confused state, that he had been poisoned with drugs. His deliriums had become rarer and then gone away altogether. But once when I sat alone with him, he startled me by suddenly turning on his side and looking straight at me

with wide-open eyes. A girl called Kinjikitilyou find that strange, don't you? Yes, I do, I said. It's not commonly used, that name. Who was she? He kept quiet, turned away, and went back to sleep. A few days after that, Hanif and Karima departed for Canada, leaving him, they said, in my custody: Martin, he's in your hands. Kamal was sitting up on the reclining bed as they embraced him and took their leave. It was a sad moment to watch, but the parent and the kids had had a talk and apparently come to an understanding. Don't you want to return home? I asked him once we were alone. We exchanged a look, and he replied, haltingly, in a low voice, I must find out first. I don't know... I don't know what happened... I don't know if I've seen

her... I did not need to ask who. Over the weeks that followed I saw him regularly, and he seemed to welcome my attention. He was a lonely man, and not only in this city, where he knew no one besides me and an old schoolteacher; a lonely man anywhere, who had after three and a half decades come back in search of someone he had loved once. What he discovered was his nightmare. It had left him with a dreadful uncertainty. What exactly had he seen and heard during that bizarre ordeal? How much was true, how much, simply, hallucination? He wanted to talk, I was there to listen. I was his comfort, his sounding board, his nurse not the first publisher, surely, to find himself in such a role. Her actual name was Saida, he informed me. He knew her until age eleven, when his mother sent him away to become an Indian. He said this as casually as if it were the most normal thing to do. They were from Kilwa, the coastal region to the south whose recorded history and culture go back a thousand years and more. John Milton's Quiloathough recent neglect has seen it waste away into the dust of obscurity. They were an African boy and girl: their single mothers were like sisters; her grandfather was the beloved poet Mzee Omari Tamim. Their companionship had been accepted, even encouraged. He thought he would marry her. He could never understand why he

had been led on, to follow his fool's path and love her, only to be sent away to pine for her. It was to find her that he had returned. A successful and driven doctor in Canada, he had reached a stage in his life of material abundance, in which however as he obliquely put his personal ties had weakened. And so one day he stepped off the treadmill, allowed an old regret to awaken, and suddenly set off to find the girl he had known as a child, keep his promise to her that he would return. That there was more to his urgency, I could guess. Wearing round his neck a tawiz, a Quranic charm given him by her when they first parted, he took a flight to Dar es Salaam. From here he took a bus to Kilwa. It was burning hot in December, and despite some talk of bandits on the way, this is what he preferred, travelling over land the sight of each bush, each blade of grass, each tree so loaded with sentiment as to grip the heart of the returning native. Thus he arrived in

Kilwa. *Revue de presse.ca* - Best 100 Books of 2012 The Magic of Saida is the sort of novel that, upon finishing, one wants to immediately read again, to examine, to study just how Vassanji works his narrative magic, and to allow oneself to savour it just that little bit longer. It's simply baffling to me that such a book that this book appears on none of the major short lists this fall. It's more than an oversight; it's a crying shame. *The Globe Mail* A gripping narrative . . . [Vassanji's] material is so compelling that he needs little more than to adopt the role of a chronicler . . . A humble village, in the imagination of this chronicler, becomes a vortex of varying belief systems and ways of life. *National Post* M.G. Vassanji's new novel offers an experience as mysterious and haunting as hearing the sudden beat of drums in the middle of the night. . . . The seductive power of Vassanji's prose mesmerizes. . . . One of Canada's best novelists . . . Vassanji's new novel is darker and far more complex than any of his previous books. *Quill Quire*