

## Quest through Memory: *The Gunny Sack*

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M.G. Vassanji is a diasporic Canadian writer who depicts the double migration of his South Asian Characters. His characters are mainly Indian Muslims of the esoteric 'Ismaili' faith (referred to fictionally as the Shamsi Sect), who made their first voyage to East Africa in the late nineteenth century as part of the labour mobility within the British Empire, working as semi-skilled labourers, small traders and junior colonial functionaries. The second immigration began in the 1960s and 1970s from post-Independence Africa towards Europe and North America.

By narrating the story of Shamsi community Vassanji gives voice to a Canadian experience that has not found its way into literature and public awareness. Vassanji comes in the second category of diaspora who inhabit a liminal position that defines their experience of migrancy. The larger themes he deals with are community values, individual identity, history, effect of colonialism and multiculturalism.

From in between the many worlds that Vassanji occupies and writes about, he has increasingly been identified as "one of the finest younger African Writers" (Brooker<sup>50</sup>), and a vocal representative of the Asian African community in East Africa. Vassanji undertakes the task of acquainting the world with pre-colonial and post-colonial Africa with the help of narratives involving quests and experiences of several individuals which at times interweave.

In order to write a narrative of a family of Asians from 1885 to 1989, Vassanji draws upon sources from G.C.K. Gwassa and John Iliffe's collaborative edition of *Records of the Maji-Maji Rising* (1967) and on Iliffe's *Modern History of Tanganyika* (1979). Vassanji asserts: "If we don't write about ourselves, we might as well consider ourselves buried" (qtd. in Malak 277).

Vassanji's novels are the most authentic and detailed elaboration on African life which was not dealt with in earlier novels. His novels are a vehicle of self-discovery which define African identity and make the Indians re-discover their cultural roots. He has created and employed African words with English. Madan Sarup in his book *Identity, Culture and the Postmodern World* (1996) mentions that every identity has a history. This observation helps us understand as to why postcolonial writers thematically draw upon the personal, communal and national histories of their people in their respective novels. Sarup is convinced that post-colonial narratives are actually the constructions of their life histories as the writers try to carve a sense of being for themselves. Vassanji's characters' occupy an interstitial or in-between space which is characterised by a division between antagonistic cultures, that is Asian and African. According to Bhabha:

These in-between spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood -- singular or communal -- that initiate new signs of identity and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself [...] it is in the emergence of the interstices -- the overlap and displacement of domains of difference -- that the inter-subjective and collective experiences of nationness, community interest or cultural values are negotiated. (*The Location of Culture* 98)

When any two cultural worlds meet, the being formed from this union is charged with the relentless quest of trying to find his own identity. Vassanji seems to suggest that when one exists in between several cultures, it is necessary for him to have a distinguishing identity, in this case an in-between sense of being. Vassanji highlights in his novels a new type of culture which forms when different communities interact.

Vassanji's works represent the convergence of cultures that characterizes both East Africa and Asia. The particular history of immigrant communities once or twice removed

from Asia inspires his portrayal of conflicting relationships between individuals and the communities to which they belong. These communities, although always central to characters' identities, are both provisional and mutable. In the novels the East African coast is just one of the liminal spaces where the first Indian immigrants, the Shamsis from Gujarat, settled in an area already characterized by the cultural syncretism between the Bantu and Arab cultures that produced the Swahili culture. Mary Louise Pratt calls this place contact zone: "the space of colonial encounters, the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations" (6).

Like Vassanji himself his characters are also hybrids who migrate from one country to another. His main idea is to show how migrations affect the identity of an individual. Vassanji's narrators are one part archival historian, two parts family genealogist, three parts amateur sleuth and four parts self-conscious theorist with each adding to the intermeshing web of chronicle and conjecture, coincidence and connotation that drives his stories to their ultimate disclosure. (Mehrotra 284)

Vassanji wants to trace the past of the migrant community which is absent from the official records of the country. As Harish Narang observes: History fascinates Vassanji. If there is one common thread running through all his fiction – novels as well as short stories-- it is his concern of history – history of individuals, communities and nations. Vassanji believed that the fictional mode is a very valid mode [...] for perceiving and writing the history of a society, including that of its individual members. (7)

Vassanji converts history into a continuous process of reinvention and reinterpretation. A constant preoccupation in Vassanji's fiction is with the question of dislocation and the attendant need for memory. This recourse to usable pasts is figured both as a universal, existential necessity and as a particular trait of immigrant communities. Vassanji's narratives treat diaspora as a mere trope for the human condition which is situated within a specific and ultimately undeniable history. So central is the 'historical' to Vassanji's imagination that his narratives consciously contemplate on the very process of memory itself. Memory, as Govinden observes, "is indeed the weapon not just to reconstruct the past, but to interpret it" (26).

The trope of memory is used to foreground the part of experience ignored or suppressed and to make it accessible to contemporary readers. The author uses memory as "the metaphorical sign of the interior life to explore and represent dimensions of slave life that the classic slave narrative omitted" (Mobley 357-58).

The memory of Salim Juma, the protagonist, of *The Gunny Sack* acts as a symbolic space where he remembers dislocated Asian African experience in East Africa. This remembering includes finding family history which was unknown to him. The imaginary locations are the icons which Vassanji uses in the novel to store information. He has used the icon of a sack in *The Gunny Sack* and which stores heaps of information which is laid forth in the course of the respective novels.

The novel begins by introducing the reader to a symbol of accumulated but unorganized and incomplete memories that is to a sack in *The Gunny Sack*. In the beginning of the novel one can distinctly feel empty spaces that evoke a sense of loss as there are both missing ancestors and missing descendants. The readers are placed in between an absent past and uncertain future. In the novel Vassanji weaves together different strands and different levels of narrative – traditional and modern, oral and written – and draws together the voices remembered and filtered through the consciousness of various characters. The novel is polyphonic in nature where Vassanji makes a lot of characters mouthpieces of stories which

they narrate. The author indicates in several ways why historical memory might be available to human subjects, to expand our notion of personal experience, to refer to both ways of feeling and ways of knowing, and to include not just individual selves but also collectives – as through the Asian African experience Vassanji also acquaints us with the experiences of their community in the context of how they felt when they were wedged in between Germans and natives and when different parts of Africa were declared independent.

In the novel the quest on which the protagonist embarks is with reference to the historical sense. The historical past concerning origins engages the characters to go back through memories of countless dislocations and ruptures. Salim Juma, the protagonist, who now lives in exile in Canada, sifts through his ancestral stories, constructs and reconstructs broken personal memories. Like Salim, Pius Fernandes, the protagonist of *The Book of Secrets*, also tries to fill in the gaps of a colonial officer's diary. In Vassanji's novel the consciousness of cultural identity and origin is possible only through dislocations and rupture, the very conditions on which memory operates.

*The Gunny Sack* is both a post-colonial and post-modern novel. As a postcolonial narrative it articulates the identity of the colonized. The language displaces conventional English with Swahili and Indian. As Bill Aschroft mentions, Vassanji makes "language variance [...] metonymic [...] of cultural difference" ('Constitutive Graphonomy' 71).

Vassanji wishes to acquaint the reader with the African way of life and for this reason he uses African words in the novel. He believes that a man always carries his culture with him which is reflected through language, stories, customs and traditions. The characters in Vassanji's novels are also people who have migrated from one country to another and they also carry with them their own culture which they transmit to their children, as in *The Gunny Sack* Kulsum, mother of the protagonist, narrates the tales of *Mahabharata* and other Indian stories to her children:

Kulsum would have something for our edification, a story from the mythology... How the five Pandava brothers, once having given their word to their mother to share everything, went on to share their wife. How Tara Rani would steal into the night to pray to her Lord against her husband's wishes. (149)

Dhanji's first son Huseni is Simba the Swahili term for lion, to his playmates and to Dhanji himself he is 'Bhima' the mythological hero of ancient epic *Mahabharata*. These people clinged to their faith and followed their customs and traditions.

As a postmodern novel *The Gunny Sack* it embodies an experimentalism with the narrative form, with which a rejuvenation of the established conventions of form itself is sought. Kant's theory of the sublime is applicable in both the novels where postmodernism is an avant-garde aesthetic discourse, which seeks to overcome the limitations of traditional conventions by searching for new strategies for the project of describing and interpreting experience. The novel "can be seen to contest master narratives of history and progress, to set models of difference, marginality and 'ex-centricity' over against the centre" (Hutcheon *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* 57) and to refuse closure by hoarding some of its secrets and declining to resolve contradictions. The novels have unusual beginnings which grip the attention of the reader right at the outset.

In the novel the task of the protagonist is to trace a history which is unknown to them. Their quest leads the protagonists to lay forth that part of history of which they had been ignorant. From the earliest times, quest is associated with some sort of journey. The hero has to undertake a perilous journey across a forbidden area, a hideous region in search of a goal. In some cases his journey takes off with no goal in sight, and yet it ends on discovery or a reward of far-reaching consequences. The quest journey is, of course, not always a movement in the temporal and spatial world. It may be an inward movement in search of

one's lost identity or a unifying center. In such a case the hero is forced to walk through his own self, confronting his inner conflicts, the opposing impulses within. Before taking up detailed critical analysis the key events of the novel may be summed up as follows.

*The Gunny Sack* (1989), the first novel by Vassanji, celebrates the spirit of early Asian migrants from India who moved to East Africa in the early 1900s. Living under German colonial rule, the family of Dhanji Govindji become permanent residents of Africa while witnessing historical events that result in the birth of African nationalism. In this novel, Vassanji focuses on the problematic union of East Africa and South Asia. Vassanji's protagonists, Salim in *The Gunny Sack* gives voice to their ethnic group. This strategy represents one of the common features of postcolonial narratives, whereby characterization signifies not an exercise of isolation but a deliberate endeavour at contextualizing an individual's destiny within that of a family, of an ethnic community, of a nation. Vassanji depicts inter-national migration as Asian African characters leave one contained and defined spatial territory, cross one continent and live in another.

The novel recount migrations, and emergence of hybrid cultures and identities. For this Vassanji selects a narrator Salim Juma Huseni in the *The Gunny Sack*. He is a hybrid who occupies an in-between space in terms of nation, ethnicity and race. His very name exhibits his cultural hybridity rooted in African and Asian ancestry: Salim in Cutchi and Salim/Salum in Swahili with his nickname Kala from the Indian language. Vassanji chooses a name which he says was selected due to its ambiguity:

[...] my initial reason was to choose a name which was deliberately ambiguous, one which could be both Indian and African, and thus describes my narrator. And Salim lends itself to such a duality, as does Juma, the surname. I knew that both Rushdie and Naipaul had a Salim but that did not bother me. I was doing something different. (qtd in Kanaganayakam 128)

The first epigraph of *The Gunny Sack* is from a poem of W. B. Yeats:

From man's blood-sodden hearts are sprung  
Those branches of the night and day  
Where the gaudy moon is hung  
What's the meaning of all song?  
"Let all things pass away."

The epigraph in a way suggests that the past is part of one's life; one should acknowledge it and then let it go. In the second epigraph Vassanji has first written few lines in an African language and then translated them into English. It says:

enga taa katika pepo  
haiziwiliki izimikapo sasa mi  
huano izimishiyo

Behold the lantern in the wind  
now beyond help  
you see it extinguished

Through these lines Vassanji seems to suggest that though he has migrated to Canada, he still retains his ties with Africa through language.

Breaking away from the conventional modes of nineteenth century English novels, the narrative in *The Gunny Sack* begins not from the beginning of the narrator's life but by introducing us to a sack which is a repository of collective memory and becomes almost an icon. The sack belongs to Ji Bai, an ancestor of the narrator. In choosing not to hand the sack to her own family but to the descendants of Dhanji Govindji's other wife, Ji Bai makes a gesture of belongingness and redemption.

She wants to acquaint the narrator with a past which is unknown to him; Richard Terdiman in his book *Present Past: Modernity and the Memory Crisis* (1993) elaborates on the fact that “memory is the modality of our relation to the past, it is the faculty that sustains continuity in collective and individual memory, and it is a means through which the past reveals itself to, and shapes, the present” (9).

As Terdiman notes, memory’s tendency to become intertwined with cognitive processes makes the resultant generation of meaning highly intricate. Memory forms an important constituent of the novel. It signifies the loss of space called home but also propels the migrants to create a home away from home. Memories also bear out that identity of the migrants does not rest in fixed cultural signifiers. Memories also bring to the fore not only the essential difference between first and second generation migrants but also the fact that identity is evolutionary and ever-changing.

The novel *The Gunny Sack* emerges from multi-cultural spaces, contains interpretations from multiple voices and relies mainly on collective memory through the process of storytelling. As G.D. Killam remarks:

The gunny sack is a repository of family history, a Pandora’s box of memories and mementoes and operates as the organizing metaphor of the novel. The memorabilia that Salim takes from the gunny sack refresh his memories of the oral history of the family and cause him to dig further into the cause and effects of events associated with the gunny sack’s contents. (22)

The gunny is a mixed bag of shameful but also usable parts of the past, which the original owner Dhanji Govindji had hidden away from view to keep the family name respectable. The mementoes consist of a bead necklace, a photograph, a cowrie shell, a brass incense holder, a Swahili cap, a broken rosary, a blood-sustained Muslin shirt and three books.

The gunny, according to Ji Bai, will act as a Pandora’s Box for the one who opens it; she says, “He who opens it will suffer the consequences” (4), as he will have to trace the past in full detail. The novel begins with an address to memory:

Memory, Ji Bai would say, is this old sack here, this poor dear that nobody has any use for any more. Stroking the sagging brown shape with affection, she would drag it closer, to sit at her feet like a favourite child. In would plunge her hand through the gaping hole of a mouth, and she would rummage inside. Now you feel this thing here, you fondle that one, you bring out this naughty little nut and everything else in it rearranges itself. (3)

Ji Bai begins by saying that memory is of no use to the youngsters. Her great grandson Aziz gives the sack to Salim, her illegitimate greatgrandson. The sack contains all the details of their lives.

The gunny sack that Aziz brings stands explicitly as a metaphor for an indestructible past that an immigrant community cannot reject. Each passing generation gives the bundle of the past to the next generation. Aziz wishes that Salim should burn the sack. But Salim takes up the task of revisiting the past. The sack contains some specific items which are all related to a story. When one item of the gunny sack relates a story the other stories rearrange themselves for getting narrated.

*The Gunny Sack* has a quest motif but these novels are very different from the bildungsroman genre, as the individual quest for selfhood and identity is replaced here by the quest for a collective and communal identity. The Asian African characters in the novel are in one way or the other trying to trace their roots in Africa. This quest for a sense of belonging in a way connects the life of Dhanji Govindji with his greatgrandson Salim Juma. When Salim acquires the sack he names it as Shehrzade, or Sheru who would acquaint him with the



past. First of all the narrator is fictionalized and later the subject will be fictionalized. He presents the sack as follows:

It sits beside me, seductive companion, a Shehrzade postponing her eventual demise, spinning out yarns, telling tales that have no beginning or end, keeping me awake night after night, imprisoned in this basement to which I thought I had escaped. (6-7)

This Shehrzade is similar to the Shehrzade of *Arabian Nights* that keeps on narrating tales of the past which in a way becomes a kind of quest. As Rosemary Marangoly George observes: the fear of impending death forces the Shehrzade into weaving endless tales from the loom in order to eternally postpone death in the *Arabian Nights*, the fearsome possibilities of marginalization and epistemic death in an overwhelmingly powerful host culture compel the diasporic self to churn out narratives for cultural survival. Sheru's endless tales of/for self survival curiously parallel Vassanji's own story of a nondescript migrant writer in an alien land, struggling for identity and cultur[al] survival. (168)

The historian Sona is also present in *The Gunny Sack* where he is the brother of Salim. In order to interpret the books of Dhanji Govindji, Salim seeks Sona's help. In order to exchange letters Sona and Salim decide that they will use their nicknames Sona and Kala where Sona or brightness will help his brother Kala, darkness to come to light. He is the one who actually persuades his brother to open the books:

... I say let's open the books and find out what the old man was up to! (15)

At present Salim is in exile in Toronto. From this vantage point he would look at the history of his community. He says: "Light drifts in through the one window, and I have already discovered a pastime for the daylight hours. I follow footsteps" (7).

Salim asks the sack to begin the stories from the beginning, 'Beginning' is what interests Vassanji. The sack starts narrating Salim's life stories but then Salim asks the sack to narrate the story of his greatgrandfather Dhanji Govindji. At once stories appeared as drifting images.

Images like confetti, like cotton lint in Ji Bai's mattress shop, drift through my mind haphazardly, each one a clue to a story, a person. A world. Sounds knock in my brain demanding entrance, rude gate-crashers jostling for right of way, until I in a dizzy spell say, All right, now what, Shehrbanoo? Leave this magic. (7)

It appears that images like confetti appear which are all from one paper but have assumed different stories -- each piece a new person, who is part of an altogether new story.

The first story which comes out of the sack is that of Dhanji Govindji, how he migrated to Africa. Dhanji Govindji's migration to Africa was due to the 'push' factor, as in India economic difficulties cropped up and people who went to Africa came back as rich and successful.

Men returned from Zanzibar invariably rich; and when a bullock cart entered a village carrying its exotic passenger from abroad, gangs of boys would usher it in, with cries of 'Africa se aya hai! Africa se aya hai!'... If one of these boys got into trouble, 'Go to Africa' they told him. (8)

The later generations of Dhanji Govindji dropped their Hindu names as they identified with the Islamic culture and considered themselves Muslims. The Shamsis' ethnic identity, while enduring in the diaspora, becomes transformed as it comes into contact with other ethnicities and cultures. It is clear that Vassanji's novel presents us with a form of diasporic identity that is not dependent upon homeland. The Shamsis "constantly produce and reproduce themselves anew, through transformation and difference" (Hall 244). And the transformations and differences appear along various socio-cultural borders of the community, especially those of religion, race, ethnicity, gender, language, social status and classes. Socio-cultural borders are, to a certain degree, unfixed since they relate to ethnicity

and ethnic identity. As Roy Chow observes, that “Ethnicity signifies the social experience which is not completed once and for all but what is constituted by a continual, often conflictual, working – out of its grounds” (143). Thus, the socio-cultural border becomes the site where ethnicity is worked out, and these borders are crucial to the survival and cohesion of the community.

The Shamsis in Africa are like the colonizer who had brought with him his own preferences and prejudices. In the two binary opposites, Indian and African, everything African such as colour, physical features, food, dress, cultural practices is considered inferior. Armed with an innate sense of racial superiority, the incoming Indian migrants play out the same role vis-a-vis the black Africans that was played out by white colonizers in non-white colonies. Soon after Dhanji Govindji arrives in Zanzibar he buys a woman slave Bibi Taratibu, whom he later leaves after his formal marriage to a woman of Indian origin.

Like his father, Juma (Salim’s father) finds solace in friendship with an older African woman, Mary; a kind of surrogate mother for him. However, during the Mau Mau rebellion, Juma and his wife Kulsum betray her by handing her son to the police, who is a suspected rebel. Salim wonders at this situation and says that Africa would have been different if interracial marriages had been allowed. He says:

Tell me, Shehrbanoo, would the world be different if that trend had continued, if there had been more Husenis, and if these chocolate Husenis with curly hair had grown up unhindered, playing barefoot in Kanzus and Kofias clutching Arabic readers... (14)

As Arun Prabha Mukherjee notes, “The ‘using’ and ‘discarding’ of Bibi Taratibu becomes a trope for Indians’ relationship to their adopted land” (175).

With the intervention of Govindji’s legally wedded wife, Bibi Taratibu is pushed to the margin, to the forest -- a place reserved for nature and half castes. Vassanji tells us that colonialism may have been harsh and exploitative but for the people of that era, especially Asians, it came in a different guise where they considered themselves superior to native Africans. So when Huseni keeps a connection with his mother he is rebuked by Dhanji Govindji. He is forced to choose between his Indian father and his African mother, between ‘the solar race’ and ‘slaves’. Huseni however rejects both; he becomes a being who forever walks in the forest in search of himself. As he is a hybrid, the Asian community does not accept him fully due to his African matrilineage and paradoxically also condemns him if he keeps any connection with Africans. Thus he is a being who is devoid of the sense of belongingness because Asians with whom he lives makes him aware that he is an ‘outsider’. He however considers himself a member of the family and takes care of his younger brother Juma.

Huseni’s disappearance inspires his father’s quest and the father tries to find his son. Govindji accepts the fact that he has failed to keep his family together. He goes to a lot of places but his search proves to be futile. For continuing his journeys he not only uses his own money but also the money of the community which people had deposited with him for helping people of the community in India. Due to this embezzlement of money Govindji is murdered by some unknown men. The family members believed that he was murdered by their own community members. The first section of the book ends with the unraveling of the sin of the family on which they had maintained their silence.

This was the sin Ji Bai mentioned, the guilt which they carried silently in their breasts, with the knowledge that there were people, there were families, who knew of it and could point figures at them. (67)

When the sack acquaints Salim with Dhanji Govindji’s futile journeys and Huseni’s disappearance, he wonders at his own position. It appears to him that this ‘running’ away from situations is in his genes. He contemplates:

The question that comes to mind is: in coming here, have I followed a destiny? Satisfied a wanderlust that runs in the blood? Or do I seek in genes merely an excuse for weakness, an inability to resolve situations? Perhaps it is this weakness that's in the blood: can you distinguish such weakness from wanderlust? When does a situation become impossible enough to justify escape? (80)

Salim like Dhanji Govindji is unable to resolve situations. He is unable to solve the dilemma whether to live with his family or to live with Amina. Salim further comments: I too have run away, absconded. And reaching this grim basement, I stopped to examine the collective memory – this spongy, disconnected, often incoherent accretion of stories over generations. Like the karma a soul acquires, over many incarnations, the sins and merits, until in its final stages it lumbers along top-heavy with its accumulations, desperately seeking absolution.

I like my forefathers before me, have run away. (80)

Salim Juma's legacy of miscegenation from his grandfather Huseni assigns him a hybridized identity which is troubled with a search – A search for selfhood that continues down the generations. He says that his soul seeks liberation. One can get liberation when one is at peace with one's own self and this peace can only be attained when one solves the riddles agitating one's mind. Salim feels he will attain peace when he knows each and every detail of his family history.

While narrating the stories of the sack, Salim at times makes his own assertions and tries to trace information on issues on which the sack has no clue. One such instance is when the sack tells of Bibi Taratibu and Huseni's disappearance but does not tell about Bibi Taratibu's family and her later interaction with her son. Salim wonders:

Tell me, you who would know all... what was she like, this gentle one, this Bibi Taratibu given to my ancestor for comfort [...] From what ravaged tribe, gutted village, was she brought to the coast, and did she not also think of her home, her slaughtered father and uncles, her brother and sisters also taken away...

She demurs, my gunny sack. Slave women, she says, wore a colourful cloth round their bodies, under the shoulders. She must have been dark dark, because she came from the interior. And technically she was not a slave, because the British government of India had forbidden its subjects to keep slaves. Other than that? Surely there must have been something between this slave woman and her son Huseni, for he kept on seeing her against his father's wishes, against respectability... (29)

In the novel one finds that the voice of the woman is absent who is left alone by her husband. First Bibi Taratibu is left by Dhanji Govindji, Moti his daughter-in-law by his son Huseni, and then his great grandson Salim also leaves Amina and marries Zainab.

Vassanji's shamsi characters have an ambiguous relationship with the colonial governments. As a trading community, the shamsis were indispensable to the colonial establishment, first to the German and then to the British. According to Peter Simatei:

Vassanji [...] is not interested in constructing a discourse overtly oppositional to the colonial one. This certainly has something to do with the position occupied by the East African Asians in the racially layered colonial system where they were more part of the colonizing structure than a colonized people. (82)

In the second section of *The Gunny Sack* Salim narrates his personal story as to how they survived after his father's death. His mother Kulsum's life is also a quest for identity where first of all she asks her husband to shift to another house. Then after her husband's death she migrates to Kariakoo where she sets up a business. She strives hard to keep her children safe when Africa witnesses bloody revolution for independence. She does not



readily accept family ties with Ji Bai as she does not want to be associated with Dhanji Govindji's family who has committed an atrocious sin.

Salim recounts his first meeting with Ji Bai and describes how Ji Bai acted like a prophet and had said:

“Well listen, son of Juma you listen to me and I shall give you your father Juma and his father Huseni and his father...” (166)

Ji Bai's statement in a way highlights Salim's own point of view that his name chose him to witness the family history:

How much in a name? Salim Juma the name chose me, and it chose my future and this basement in which I hide myself with my gunny. (133)

Ji Bai acquainted Salim with that part of his family history about which Salim was totally ignorant. He remembers his first look of the gunny:

I remember my first view of Shehrbanoo... a dumpy gunny sack enclosing a broken world, the debris of lives lived... slumped in the inner room beside Ji Bai's bed, her mouth closed with a sisal twine. Ji Bai untied the loose knot, instantly a smile appeared on the gunny where there was a grimace before and that laughing mouth was never shut... (166-67)

As Ji Bai unties the twine, she will solve some of the questions which Salim encountered in his life as to why he is addressed as a 'half caste'. The gunny starts laughing and this laugh is a malicious laugh as the gunny will trap Salim in his family's past from which Salim thought he had escaped. He accepts the task of following the 'footsteps' of his ancestors. As *The Gunny Sack* is a novel about Asian-Africans, Vassanji describes in detail how these people tried to survive and succeed in the host culture. Loyalty, if any, is to oneself and to one's family and community. The Indian diaspora in Africa opt for the safer middle-class. This is revealed when Indians in Africa side with the Europeans and not with the natives in the Mau-Mau movement. While describing Tanzania's independence the narrator mentions how their community was a mere spectator and did not participate in the nation building process. Their reaction to independence is described as follows:

What is this thing called independence? We woke up one morning, the green and black and gold flew instead of the red white and blue [...] Then there were of course the demagogues out to provoke reaction against the Asians. “The Asians are not integrating enough!” thundered one. “If you want to stay in Africa, you must learn to live with Africans...”

This flag; roared the commissioner, “it has the colours of Africa! This black and green and yellow flag – what does the black signify, eh jamani?” He held up his arm and pinched his black skin for all to see. “This. And the green is the beautiful land of Africa. Eh? And what is this yellow stripe in the middle? Eh?”

“The Indians! The Mhindis!” shouts an unknown voice. (198-99)

The migrants keep aloof from the happenings in the new nation because of the belief that they are superior. According to A.P. Mukherjee observes:

Vassanji has a remarkable capacity for creating a complex narrative pattern with seemingly simple details of day-to-day life. And yet, hidden in these same mundane details are tough questions about history, colonialism and the ambiguous role of Indians as a group whose dual role as the colonized and as collaborators makes it hard to portray their situation in the binary opposition of colonizer/colonized prevalent in postcolonial criticism. (167)

Each political development underlines the Asian Africans' precarious hold on the continent, each time their status has to be negotiated again in relation to the white colonizer, the Arabs, the Swahili, the Africans from the interior. The sense of being that Vassanji portrays for all the characters comes from this theory of discrimination. Vassanji draws our attention not only to circumstances under which Asian Africans developed their interstitiality

but also to the fact that they lost their identity every time the power structure changed. They now occupied an in-between space between the refined Africans and the native Africans.

In foregrounding the process of eastern African colonies coming to nationhood the novel presents an interstitial passage as in the double-time of the nation. Major events and experiences of diasporic people are not included in the official and objective history. The novel shows how the policy of Africanisation is underpinned by an assimilationist ideology, since the purpose of nationalist pedagogical discourse is to create one homogeneous nation of the many different ethnic communities. As Rosemary Marangoly George points out: the novel examines the impact of Julius Nyerere's Ujamaa socialist project, and the status of Indians in this newly defined national 'family' and it demonstrates that while immigrants disturb the easy interpellation of national subjects by a hegemonic discourse the implementing of such a national project 'threaten the immigrants' project ... of remaining marginal. (133)

With Julius Nyerere's party winning the elections the natives realize their powers Omari, the tailor who had worked at Kulsum's shop demands his pay: "What I want, madam, is backpay for six years according to labour salaries" (153).

Kulsum, the narrator's mother tries to safeguard her family from the experience of cultural hybridization. She is unable to reconcile with the fact that her daughter Begum would marry a White man: "Over my dead body. Do you want to murder me. Take a knife, go on, take a knife, take these scissors, I'll give you soul!" (236). When Sona decides to migrate to London, Kulsum tells him:

Don't marry a white girl. Don't smoke or drink. Don't eat pork. Don't turn your back on your faith and your community. Don't forget your family. (235)

When Asians are ill-treated, their properties are nationalised. They are expected to leave the country. The rulers said "the Asians were sabotaging the economy, hoarding to create shortages, smuggling sugar, coffee and currency, not paying taxes... and they were not integrating, not allowing their daughters to marry Africans. Therefore [...] the Asians must go" (299). The Asians start migrating to USA and Canada. This is what uncle Goa's family does when they migrate to London. Salim's own sister marries a foreigner Mr. Harris and migrates to London. Sona, Salim's younger brother also migrates to the U.S.A. to pursue his literary career.

The Shamis had waited for a saviour in India:

Shamas Pir had promised the Shamsis a saviour from the west, and they had waited for hundreds of years. Now it seemed to some that he had come, not a pir, but a Pierre, Trudeau of Canada, promising a cold Eldorado in the north. He will take us, they said, as he took the Ugandans, leave it to Pierre True-do! And they, who had renounced the Queen's rule for a new future, abandoned hope and returned to her, still close but separated by an ocean. (305)

In *The Gunny Sack* Sona and Hassan's family all migrate to the U.S. because of better opportunities. The Asians who stay back in Africa try their level best to prove themselves loyal Africans. This is reflected when Salim joins the National Service Camp at Uhuru Camp. Uhuru is situated at the border of the country. He goes to the camp carrying a big trunk like Dhanji Govindji who had also migrated to Africa carrying a big trunk. He describes the topography of this place: "How to explain the numbness, the loneliness, the total paralysis of memory, the glazing over the reality, at finding myself in the interior of Africa not knowing, not knowing what to expect" (147). The trunk which Salim brings represents the likes and prejudices which a migrant takes with him when he migrates to some other place. Salim says: "We Indians have barged into Africa with our big black trunk and every time it comes in our way" (250). A tie to his Shamsi community is reinforced when in the camp he goes to see the mukhi at Kaboya and forms association with them.

At the camp Salim also meets the radical Amina, after which the entire course of his life is changed. He is also involved in radical politics. Their first conversation is important where they claim their right on Africa.

“Why do you call me ‘Indian’? I too am an African. I was born here. My father was born here – even my grandfather!”

“And then? Beyond that what did they come to do, these ancestors of yours? Can you tell me? Perhaps you don’t know. Perhaps you conveniently forgot – they financed the slave trade!”(258)

The past is imagined in a certain way for legitimating one’s cultural identity and to justify one’s claim to a place or one’s own home which is challenged by the others. The place where one resides becomes a site of competing for belongingness by migrant groups and the people who call themselves indigenous. According to Bhabha:

The exercise of power may be both more politically effective and psychically affective because their discursive liminality may produce greater scope for strategic manoeuvre and negotiation. (*Nation and Narration* 296, 97)

The interaction in which Salim and Amina engage demonstrates how in a diasporic space of conflicting subjectivities the past is deployed and counter-deployed for inscribing oneself in ‘home’ while excluding the ‘other’.

This theme is explored suggestively through Salim and Amina’s affair where Salim is fond of her and follows her ideologies, while Amina is a Marxist. Through their love affair the novel once again explores the theme of cultural hybridity and links Salim’s life with his great-grandfather. But Salim soon realizes that their relationship is only possible in the forest, a place away from civilization:

To have met in the jungle and fallen in love there, among people we did not know, on the banks of a stream, under a tree, how easy it was. No sooner were we back in the city than we started carrying the burden of our races... (280)

The failure of the love relationship is located in the movement from the forest, a free site, to the city where interracial marriages were not accepted. Their relationship ends when Amina goes to the U.S.A. and Salim marries an Asian African girl who can speak Gujarati. This once again links the life of Salim and his great-grandfather Dhanji Govindji who had also left a native woman and had then married a girl of his own caste. Salim later flees from Africa to Canada because it is expected that he will be arrested due to his links with Amina. Salim says: “I think I ran away from the marriage, an impossible domestic situation... like my grandfather, Huseni... and even his father Dhanji Govindji who went to look for him” (325).

The lives of Salim, Huseni and Dhanji Govindji are interlinked as all of them escape their domestic situation. In the end the sack narrates the story of Ji Bai who went to Bajapur, her native place in India. Vassanji completes the narration from where it had begun as Dhanji Govindji had migrated to Africa from India.

The ending of the novel is where Vassanji puts the past to rest for a better and promising future. The last chapter of is titled ‘And the Final Night’ as here Salim will put the past to rest as he had seen the past in full detail and is now acquainted with all the details about which he had been totally ignorant. He addresses memory as follows:

Memory, Ji Bai said, is this gunny sack.

I can put it all back and shake it and churn it and sift it and start again, re-order memory, draw a new set of lines through those blots, except that each of them is like a black hole, a doorway to a universe. It can last forever, this game, the past has no end – but no, Shehrbanoo, you will not snare me like that, let it end today, this your last night. (326)

Salim says that the past is an endless territory which can begin and continue its journey through a different course and can narrate the stories once again. He decides that he will go back to his wife and daughter Amina. He thinks of his daughter and says:

The running must stop now, Amina. The cycle of escape and rebirth, uprooting and regeneration, must cease in me. Let this be the last runaway, returned, with one last, quixotic dream. Yes, perhaps here lies redemption, a faith in the future, even if it means for now to embrace the banal present, to pick up the pieces of our wounded selves, our wounded dreams, and pretend they're still there intact, without splints, because from our wounded selves flowers still grow. (330)

Salim talks of return which symbolizes a return to home where new and stable identities will be formed. He is tired by feelings of unhomeliness and impossibility of belonging. The basement of Toronto is in reality a vantage point from where Salim makes assessment about his ancestors and about his own life. His plight is that of a being who wants to belong to a place which denies him that security. As Bhabha asserts:

The recesses of the domestic space become sites for histories' most intricate invasions. In that displacement, the borders between home and the world, become confused, and uncannily, the private and the public become part of each other, forcing upon us a vision that is divided and disorienting. (*The Location of Culture* 9)

East Africa, for the migrants, is one such place that they want to forget but are unable to do. The novel portrays the 'interstitiality' of such characters.

Thus in *The Gunny Sack* Vassanji shows the identity crisis of first generation and second generation migrants in Africa, who in spite of their ill-treatment by Africans stay in Africa.

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