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## Discrimination and Difference, Racial and Colonial: An Overview of M.G Vassanji's *The Gunny Sack* and *No New Land*

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The paper focuses on how the consequences of racism and colonialism distort and change the very identity of the Asian African immigrants during the colonial regime of the Germans, British or the Americans. Racial discrimination and difference is so rough and atrocious that it snatches away the entity and existence of an immigrant who enters a colonial country with the hope of better habitat and opportunities. Racial tension makes the national integrity looser than before because of its violence and brutality in making the fellowmen enemies. Colonial domination sows the seeds of racism as racial discrimination connotes the distinction between the high and low, superior and inferior, developed and underdeveloped. It leaves the human life ambiguous and ambivalent like a ship without a rudder. Based on the postcolonial theories of Said's Orientalism, Fanon's colour biasness, Bhabha's ambivalence and mimicry and Spivak's subaltern perspectives, the paper attempts to discourse on the racial and colonial discrimination in M.G Vassanji's novels especially in *The Gunny Sack* and *No New Land*. It targets to pinpoint how the colonisers and even the colonised people treat their fellow people as the other. The dualism is not in between the superior and the inferior, coloniser and colonised; rather it is hidden in human psyche as the difference between the self and other. However, the way the colonised people sometimes create homogeneity in spite of the vast differences in race, caste, and religion is also focused in this paper.

### Introduction

Postcolonial literature is a body of literary writing that answers back the questions raised by the discourse of European colonization in the Middle East, Asia and Africa. It designates to critique and justify the consequences of racism, colonization and decolonization of nations. It questions the basic duality between the coloniser and the colonized. Edward Said in *Orientalism* (1978) explores the European racial superiority and subverts the discriminations between the Westerners and the Orientals, White and Black, the superior and inferior, dominant and dominated. Gayatri Spivak uses Foucault's term 'epistemic violence' to 'destruct the non-western ways of perceiving the world and the resultant dominance of the western ways of perceiving the world.' (Sharp, 2008) In *Imperialism and Sexual Difference* (1986) Spivak identifies a cultural norm of white male as a political trope. It signifies that the whites symbolically represent the vibrant powerful masculinity while the blacks hold the characteristics of submissive femininity. Here Spivak deconstructs the masculine universalism to give voice to the feminine entity. Therefore, while colonialism works to represent the brutality and dominating force of the colonizers, postcolonialism questions the way of imposing power, legacy and authority itself. However, the sense of inferiority comes in the mind of the colonised people the moment they come in contact with the high culture and the superior people as the colonisers think themselves to be. This happens only because of globalization in economy and culture and the migration of the people from one country to

another. The Third World /postcolonial writers mainly focus on the consequences of migration and immigration at the ethnic, cultural, linguistic and political levels. One instance of the Third World writing – writing by the Canadian writers would vivify the problems and consequences of colonialism and postcolonialism. In line with Austin Clarke, Michael Ondaatje, Neil Bissoondath, Rohinton Mistry, M.G Vassanji writes from the perspective of the East African Indians who undergo a double migration from India to Africa and to Canada or the United States. As a postcolonial writer, he tries to deconstruct the difference between the colonizer and the colonized, dominant and dominated. He examines the lives of the migrants and immigrants: "the Indian diaspora is very important...once I went to the US, suddenly the Indian connection became very important: the sense of origins, trying to understand the roots of India that we had inside us." (Kanaganayakam, p. 21)

East African writers interested in colonial discourse in their novels are endowed with the inclination to epitomize the intertwined identity of the East African people. The ambivalent existence of the disgraced people who are often segregated from the mainstream culture is best enacted by the writers. There is a long list of those writers who confront with the life-histories, community, and race of the people from Nigeria, South Africa, Somalia, and Zimbabwe. M.G Vassanji is from Kenya and is "one of the finest younger African writers and a vocal representative of the ambiguous experience of the Asian Africans as a cultural community in (post)colonial East Africa." (Moore, 2001) Along with him there is Ngugi wa Thiong'o and both of them had the first hand experience of British colonialism. Whereas Ngugi in his works like *A Grain of Wheat* (1967) represents the colonial binarism and hegemonic attributes of the society, Vassanji in his novels portrays the marginalized and excluded East African people who live a life of ambiguity and ambivalence. They are the continuous prey to the colonial defiance and degradation that often remind them of their marginalized and inferior race and colonial coercion.

Vassanji has written six acclaimed and rewarded novels in all: *The Gunny Sack*, *No New Land*, *The Book of Secrets*, *Amriika*, *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall* and *The Assassin's Song*. In all the novels his basic intention is to project the hardships of life, the ambiguous belonging and marginalized position of the East African people. They belong to the migrant community who often experience a sense of exclusion and discrimination because of their racial inferiority and colonial subjugation and subordination. Though they often endeavour to be at par with the colonisers by imitating and adapting their high culture, they are ultimately left with humiliation and apartheid separation in the colonial country. Our discussion centres on two of Vassanji's novels *The Gunny Sack* (1989) and *No New Land* (1991). The choice is because of our sole intention to depict the imagined and lived experiences of the novelist in his texts. Both the novels narrativise the experience of postcolonial fragmentation and displacement of the identity of the East African hybrid people.

### **Racial tensions**

Hybridity in the lives of the characters is the outcome of their intimate contact, during their way of migration and immigration, with the people of different castes, religions, sects, creeds etc. As the East Africans are racially different from the colonial, imperial Whites and also the native Africans, they cannot help but adapt both physically and psychologically, to multiple cultures, customs, and community life of the people. However the difference and discrimination still remain and they sometimes appear so brutal and atrocious that they result into protest, rebellion, war and revolt.

The atrocity of racial discrimination has its origin in the capitalist system of society. According to Peter Bohmer (1999), what Marxist theory says about racism is that it serves the interests of the capitalist or employer class by dividing black and white workers reducing their potential unity and thus their bargaining power. Racism is a system of oppression of the

people of colour and the ideology of white supremacy and black inferiority. In his novels, Vassanji argues that racial discrimination is practised at all levels, from personal to social and national. In *The Gunny Sack*, Vassanji finds racism in the age-old history, the gunny sack (symbolically enough), of the East African community who go through migration from South Asia to East Africa and the West. Being disturbed by racial and political tensions, they leave their home to migrate to Canada or the United States in search of peace and belongingness. The novel opens with Dhanji Govindji's migration from Porbander to Zanzibar in search of better life and business. The new life there throws him into danger the moment he is enslaved by the slave girl Bibi Taratibu who 'must have been dark dark, because she came from the interior.' (Vassanji, 27) His liaison with the native African girl does not rest for too long and it leads to a sense of rootlessness and identity crisis.

The relation between the East Africans and the natives is so awful and outrageous that no inter-communication is possible because of the natives' manner of treating the Asians as the colonisers themselves. In *The Gunny Sack*, the love affair between Salim, the African and Amina, the indigenous African is symbolic of not only racial difference but also national difference between the Asians and the native Africans. Salim was once harassed by the recruitment officers as he could not convince them that he was not an indigenous African. He suffered alienation amidst many indigenous African colleagues in National Service Camp as he was the single Asian African there. The apartheid discrimination is so intense that his affair with Amina brings anxiety and a sense of separation in his mind. However, he manages to marry an Asian African to save his race. Salim's fractured identity is thus interpreted in terms of Black or White.

Both Salim and Amina are continuously torn apart because of the intolerable and insurmountable boundaries of their races, the Indian and the African respectively. Whereas Juma vibrantly proposes his Indian race and identity, Amina also accusingly answers to execute her own African race. The play of racial categories of discrimination and difference can be interpreted through the following conversation between the two:

Juma: "why do you call me an Indian? I was born here. My father was born here even my grandfather."

Amina: "And then? Beyond that? What did they come to do, these ancestors of yours? ...perhaps you conveniently forgot... they financed slave trade!"

Juma: "And what of your Swahili ancestors, Amina? If mine financed slave trade, you ran it." (TGS 211)

There are various instances of racial discriminations in Vassanji's *No New Land*. Nurdin and Esmail stand as the bright evidence of racial harassment as they were initially discriminated against and eventually dismissed and displaced from the mainstream culture. "The displacement, racial discrimination and the generation differences put hindrances in the way to formulate an independent individual identity." (Roy, 2013) Nurdin, the man of Asian origin fails to formulate an independent integrated identity. With East Africa getting independence, the political scenario changes as the Blacks come into power and the White domination comes to an end. However, at the crucial moment, the Asians are racially discriminated as they fail to belong to either of the groups – neither White nor Blacks. Therefore, Nurdin and his family are thrown out of Tanzania. Racism takes its horrible turn while Esmail, the Asian immigrant is cruelly punched and abused by the White youths. Nanji, the young professor suffers from the hostile appearance of racism. In an apatheistic way the passengers in the bus remain standing throughout the whole way without sharing seats with him. Nanji generalises this situation: "racism the word kept intruding his mind and kept pushing it back. On what basis racism? It could be my face, dark, brooding, scowling and cratered." (NNL 93) In other situations, once Nurdin was accused of raping a White girl and the news created a great havoc in the city. In the cafeteria Nurdin is refused to get served by

the White lady. Later, Fatima, his daughter is refused to be admitted in pharmacy because of racial difference.

The racial difference between the oppressive Whites and the oppressed Blacks symbolically represents the duality in the Self/Other relationship. Edward Said (1978) observes, “The relationship between Selves and Others is a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony.” Homi Bhabha (1994) persistently argues that the Self/Other dualism creates a sort of “cultural ambivalence”, “interstitiality” or in-betweenness which is “the Third Space of enunciation that destroys the mirror of representation facilitating the transfer between the Centre and its margins.” “It is the inter – the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the in-between space – that carries the burden of meaning and culture. It makes it possible to begin envisaging national and anti-nationalist histories of the people. And by exploring this Third Space, we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of ourselves.” (Bhabha, 1994)

The sense of discrimination and demarcation results in a sort of hyphenation between two identities, two worlds, two spaces. The in-between space is a space of compromise where there is no fixed or stable point. Colonial oppression compels man to adapt to the high culture and dominant identity within their racial boundaries. In their attempt to cross the racial boundaries they are hindered at the threshold of the two doors, the one already shut up and the door to be open, of the two worlds, the old and the new, the domestic and the foreign. This threshold is the liminality which the migrants and the natives in each of Vassanji’s novels often experience in their diasporic journey.

### **Colonial domination**

In *The Gunny Sack*, through the character of Dhanji Govindji, the trader, the trade diaspora allocated for trade relations between the Shamsis and the Gujaratis is found to be impeded by the colonial regime and authority of the Germans. ‘German interference and authority became inescapable for the traders in spite of their non-aligned position. The voice of the Shamsis muffled under the totalitarian sway of European colonizers, endured the ruthless measures imparted by the Germans as well, German justice was harsh, swift and arbitrary.’ (TGS 17) However, the chief concern of the immigrants (Shamsis) was ‘the security of their families, their trade and savings.’ (TGS 60) They resisted and confronted with the brutality and atrocity of the German imperialism. They vindicated their outcry against the colonial rule through the Maji Maji and the Mau Mau uprisings. The way of imposing Native medicines conducted by a medicine man was manipulated to defy the combative and hostile German authority. “If you refused to take the medicine, it was said, straightway, you would receive a spear in your belly. And if you took the oath and went about chanting Maji maji maji maji...” and were caught straightway you would be strung up from the nearest mango or mbuyu tree.” (TGS 18-19) Like the Maji Maji rebellion, the Mau Mau which was combated against the British imperialism was also too much threatening and perilous: ‘the dreaded words were Mau Mau.’ (TGS 85)

During the oppressive reign of the colonisers, ‘Dar es Salaam, Sultan Seyyid Majid’s aborted dream, his ‘haven of peace’, became the seat of the German dream in East Africa.’ (TGS 15) The cruel and arbitrary justice of the Germans is enacted by the cruel and notorious whipping namely the ‘khamsa ishrin’. ‘Thieves had their hands chopped, insubordination was rewarded with the dreaded khamsa ishrin, twenty-five lashes from a whip of hippo hide dipped in salt, which would never break however much blood it drew. It was said that streets of Dar es Salaam were clean because even the donkeys feared to litter them – you only had to whisper those words ‘khamsa ishrin’ into a donkey’s ears and it would straightway race to its stable to empty its bowels.’ (TGS 17) ‘There were many stories of cruelty in the farms; of beating and lashings, of a hanging, of insults to age and traditional rank. And one necessary death at which shrieks rang out of many nights.’ (17) According to Ji



Bai, the German colonization is too brutal to lead to the Maji Maji protest war. ‘Oh, the Germans,’ she said, ‘bad, bad. For a small mistake, khamsa ishrin, faap, faap. A bigger mistake, fifty strokes. Or a hundred. A thousand or more strokes given in a day... one day there was a revolt.’ (TGS 262)

We have already discussed about the disintegration between the natives and the Asian Africans which is symbolic of the lacuna between the two groups; two races, namely the colonizer and the colonised. The natives often think the Asian African as colonisers – ‘the Asians are not integrating enough!’ “If you want to stay in Africa, you must learn to live with Africans...” (TGS 185) They assume that the East Africans belong to an ‘exploiter class, a dukawallah, mere agents of the British, these oily slimy cowardly Asians.’ (TGS 263) Therefore to be fallen in love with one of the exploiter class (Salim) is doing the unthinkable. It is like the act of uprooting ‘a healthy young shoot – a lively sapling with a lot of energy and promising many new things – and transplanting it in an uncaring soil...’ (TGS 262)

The indigenous Africans are those marginalised and excluded people whose historical nuances are refined by the colonial oppression of the Whites. Dipesh Chakrabarty in his book *Provincializing Europe* (2007) portrays the humiliating attitude of the Bengali ‘bhadralok’ or the respectable bourgeois people towards the most oppressed subaltern people. In *The Gunny Sack*, Amina, the representative of the indigenous people broods upon the humiliation of the Africans in the hands of the Whites through the vibrant words -

“Do you know what it was like to be an African in colonial times, Indian? It was to be told that no matter what you achieved, you were ultimately a servant. Miss Logan our headmistress once took me aside and told me, “Amina my ayah has gone away, could you help me for a few hours today?” my ayah has gone away ... after all this, what of self respect? How many years before we regain it? I look at an Indian or a European, and I wonder, “what really does he think of me?” how can one not be militant?’ (TGS 211)

Another form of age-old colonial domination reflected in *The Gunny Sack* is the brutality of patriarchy – the deep-rooted and hegemonic system of colonising and oppressing the women. In the African societies the wives were confined within the family boundaries. They had to bear the burden of retaining the patriarchal eminence. Edward Said in his *Orientalism* correlates the East/West relationship with feminine/masculine dualism. ‘East as a whole is feminized, deemed passive, submissive, exotic, luxurious, sexually mysterious and tempting; while the west becomes masculine that is active, dominant, heroic, rational, self-controlled and ascetic.’ (McLeod, 2000) In *The Gunny Sack*, the women are treated as feeble, fragile, and sexually passive in the domain of patriarchy. Every time they are counselled with the negatives: “Do nothing to shame upon yourself. Never walk out alone. Don’t speak of your home outside the four walls. Always cover your family’s shame. Don’t come back without your husband’s permission...” (TGS 22)

*No New Land* is not an exception in the depiction of the colonial authority, its anarchy, domination and subjugation. ‘Haji Lalani went to Tanganyika as a young man of sixteen in 1906 at the time when the German government there was recruiting Britain’s Indian subjects to help build the German empire in Africa’ (NNL 12). ‘The Germans decided to let the old oriental capital go its way and to build a new European city, at a neglected village with the beautiful name of Dar es Salaam, which would come to be known as Dar’ (NNL 13). This reminds us of what Macaulay in his *Minutes on Indian Education* (1835) attempted to propose the image of the ‘brown shahib’ in consonance with Britishers’ strategy to colonise the Indians: “we must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indians in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect.”

What Franz Fanon in his book *Black Skins, White Mask* (1986) tries to explore is that the colonial brutality, subjugation, oppression, exploitation, and bigotry insert in the minds of

the colonised people the seed of imitating the culture of the colonisers to make themselves civilized, busy, descent, honourable and upright. The book 'depicts those colonised by French imperialism doomed to hold a traumatic belief in their own inferiority.' (McLeod, 2000) Here, Fanon claims, 'when the black man comes into contact with the white world he goes through an experience of sensitization. His ego collapses. His self-esteem evaporates. He ceases to be a self-motivated person. The entire purpose of his behaviour is to emulate the white man, to become like him, and thus hope to be accepted as a man.' 'It is the internalization or rather *epidermalization* of the inferiority (complex) that concerns him.' (Fanon, 1952)

In *No New Land*, Nanji, Jamal and other residents of Sixty-Nine suffer from inferiority-complex like Jemubhai Patel in Desai's *Inheritance of Loss* (2006) as they cannot adapt to the high culture of the Canadians. '...they could not relate to, all the accommodation- including the speech and jokes- being made for those others (the "Canadians") and not for them. They had been made to feel inferior.' (NNL 159) They attempt to express their 'foreignness' through their 'partial presence' (Bhabha 88) by imitating the Canadian dressing pattern and try to escape from their sense of inferiority. According to Bhabha (1994), the influence of multiple cultures brings in their mind 'a kind of tension between their identity stasis and the demand for its change and mimicry makes a compromise to the tension'. Ashcroft (2002) claims, "Mimicry of the center is the periphery to immerse themselves in the imported culture, denying their origins in attempt to become more English than the English". The beautiful quality of the Canadian clothes reflects better lifestyle and the immigrants being tempted by the possibility of rebirth through the imitation of foreign clothing decide to leave Dar. They target the new Canadians with 'tall ladies in fur, men in tweeds and leather' (NNL 52). In the 'little Paki shitty-stan' (167), Fatima sternly denies her upbringing and family and wears fashionable dresses. Nanji was 'under the impression that her wearing dresses now and more fashionable clothes meant she no longer thought much of him' (NNL 168).

Like Jemubhai in *Inheritance of Loss* (2006) who was ashamed of his epidermal difference from the White men and lost his self respect failing to conceal his skin beneath white powder, Roshan in *No New Land* also endeavours to hide her darker complexions. She uses huge make up and creams and straightens her wavy hair. She wears 'garish clothes' 'perhaps to deflect attention from her face.' (37) She was ashamed being conscious of her identity- 'she had been their father's child by a previous mother, rarely mentioned but a black woman, as everyone guessed.' (NNL 37) In fact, 'one of the major hurdles that East African Asians were to face was the notion of Africanness being equated with blackness and opposed to whiteness. Being African was not being white, in which case brown Africans were forced into a shady, borderline zone from which they had to contend with establishing their cultural credentials, by both distancing themselves from the African labourer and by not identifying too closely with the white ruling elite, as they were themselves colonized peoples.' (Hand, 2011) In this way the protagonists here try their best to court their novel identity but fail to fully authenticate themselves as Canadians. There still remains a long gap between their traditional upbringing and Canadian identity.

### **Homogeneity:**

A kind of homogeneity still lurks amidst the difference and divergence in race, class, gender, manner, attire, and demeanour of the people. In each of his novels Vassanji tries to propagate that there is some kind of oneness, unity and secularity in the different communities in a nation or nations. In *The Gunny Sack* he turns every way possible to bring about unity between the Asian Africans and the indigenous Africans. The Prime Minister of Zanzibar suggested that the Asians should intermarry with the Africans. But it was stated as farfetched, unreal and insignificant like the mating of wild beast and zebra or the lions and leopards. However for the birth of a beautiful nation, the unification is unavoidably necessary

because 'when people of two races combine, beautiful children are born with the virtues of both the races and the prejudices of neither.'(TGS 212) The scenario of the 'massala' movie from Bombay accumulates different prayers from different religious sects – Hindu, Muslim and Christian to represent universal God Almighty – 'somewhere a bearded Musulman is saying 'Allah Allah' to the click of beads, a Catholic woman is crying in front of a crucifix, and a woman in a sari plays a sitar to a Hindu god reposing on his cushion.'(TGS 161) This very clearly signifies that the Asian Africans or the native Africans should reunite to tread on the universal path in which 'there is neither Hindu nor Muslim, nor Christian nor Sikh just the one. Brahman, the Absolute. Ishvar. Allah. God.' (*The Assassin's Song*, 310) However, the racial discrimination is so deep-rooted that the reunion of the natives and the Asians is unthought-of forever.

In *No New Land* the immigrants in the Sixty Nine 'came from several different sects, singly or in packs, using all manners of approaches, bearing literature and tidings, goodwill and goodies, warnings and mercy.' (NNL 49) But they have built a cultural and geographical homogeneity among themselves living peacefully and sharing their own traditions and old legacies. 'They irrespective of their different religious beliefs adhere to their own values and live a secular life and the inhabitants of Rosecliffe Park loved gossips, debates and choice morsel parties.' (Kavitha, 2012) 'All this playing cards and chatting and discussing silly topics while glugging tea by the gallon and eating samosas- is not Canadian.' (129) 'They eat well 'chappatis and rice, vegetable, potato, and meat curries cooked the Goan, Madrasi, Hyderabad, Gujarati, and Punjabi ways, channa the Caribbean way, fou-fou the West African way.'(NNL 65) Zera does not forget to maintain the traditions at home and never imitates the Canadian culture or dressing style like other Canadian newcomers. Lalani still bears in mind an Indian saying "Eat pig and become a pig." (128) Seeing an Indian woman in green sari he 'naturally felt curious and empathized' (150). '...the Shamsis of Dar had recreated their community life in Toronto: the mosques, the neighbourhoods, the clubs and the associations.' (NNL 171) The novelist sometimes puts stress on the homogeneous nature of the world by erasing imaginatively the difference between India and Pakistan. Guyana is imagined to be situated 'somewhere near Ghana or Guinea.' (NNL 117) He attempts to bring about homogeneity in a heterogeneous community by depicting the local and national, the homely and the unhomely, the local and the global. "Vassanji succeeds 'briskly'(New, 4) in blending the private and the public, the local and the universal, the serious and the ironic, thereby establishing himself as an accomplished Canadian writer of distinct voice, vision and technique." (Malak, 1993)

## Conclusion

Racial and colonial difference is a complex and crucial experience that represents the change taking place in the socio-cultural scenario in the lives of the East African Asians and the indigenous Africans. The ideological power-politics and totalitarian attribute of the colonisers bring havoc in the normal life of Shamsi individuals who experience several intersections in their community due to the African diaspora, East African Indian diaspora and trade diaspora. Vassanji as a novelist bears the lived experience of migration, immigration, racism and ambivalence in his own life. Due to this, he excels in portraying the crucial and complex picture of the consequent changes in the lives of different people of different races, castes, religions etc. The depiction of racial conflicts and colonial domination bears no touch of artificiality and colour. It is because of this possibility that the Maji Maji, and the Mau Mau rebellion and their effects often remind us of the rebellion and struggle that took place during the Indian National Movement. It is an undeniable fact that the difference between the high and low, superior and inferior is still present in our society. This does not invoke that the exploration of inferiority complex and mimicry should change the very identity of the people. Racial politics should not be too brutal to compel man to treat his



fellows as enemies. Thus, Vassanji's encyclopaedia of novels is a remarkable gateway to pursue the complex discourse of colonialism and postcolonialism.

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