

## M.G. Vassanji's *The Gunny Sack* and The Art of Interplaying History

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**Abstract:** M.G. Vassanji is a Canada based Asian-African writer. He has authored seven novels, two short story collections, a travelogue and edited one essay collection. Migrations and its impact on people always remained his thematic concern. More over he is very much concerned about double and triple diaspora and its impact on the people concerned. *The Gunny Sack* is M.G. Vassanji's the first and the best of his novels; considered 'an African answer to *Midnight's Children*'. *The Gunny Sack* presents South Asian East Africans 'trishanku' state in East Africa amidst postcolonial betrayal and political ambiguities. Vassanji has artistically made use of the history to present South Asians cause in East Africa; probably this made him one of the best post-colonial writers.

**Keywords:** Postcolonial, Asian-african fiction, Diaspora.

**Introduction:** This article will draw upon analyses of M.G. Vassanji's *The Gunny Sack* (1989) as evocative, unmistakably new African writings that exemplify the seeping, cumulative signs of change of South Asians life in East Africa amidst postcolonial betrayal and political ambiguities. The article lays much emphasis on the trajectory of history that has gone through the novel. The article is underpinned by the novel *The Gunny Sack*, the reference books and articles, and the interviews conducted with the writer. In one of his essays reflecting over history Vassanji writes:

We have in this instance the writer as a preserver of the collective tradition, a folk historian and myth maker. He gives himself history; he recreates the past, which exists only in memory and is otherwise obliterated, so fast has his world transformed... (1985:63).

Vassanji's writings represent the ambiguous experience of Asian Africans as a cultural community in (post)colonial East Africa. Through his writings he alerts his community of the need to reveal the untold complex and unique (hi)story of being an East African of South Asian descent. In an interview with Wahome Mutahi, he says:

I have tried to define a certain kind of East African Asian, to create a mythology which applies not to a nation as in Ngugi wa Thiong'o's case, but to a minority which does not know where it belongs (1991).

Vassanji's oeuvre includes *No New Land* (1991), *The Book of Secrets* (1994), *Amriika* (1999), *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall* (2003), *The Assassin's Song* (2007) and *The Magic of Saida* (2012). Two of his short story collections are *Uhuru Street* (1991) and *When She Was Queen* (2005). He has got to his credit a collection of essays called *A Meeting of Streams* (1985) and a travelogue *A Place Within: Rediscovering India*

(2008).

**History:** The abolition of slavery left the colonizers with labour shortage problems. For this, they found a solution in *Girmit* system (an agreement or contract labour). Under this agreement millions of South Asians and Chinese were sent to African colonial states. In fact it's a modified form of slavery. In slavery Blacks were illegally, ruthlessly exploited, but in *Girmit* exploitation was legal and perplexing (Sudesh Mishra, 2005: 15-36). Thus much of the labour that went into the building of the colonial world came from South Asia. Indian coolies and workers toiled not just on plantations, but cleared forests, built roads and railways, worked on construction and industries staying in 'Barracks' (small congested place given to former slaves). As per the available statistics nearly 11 millions South Asians migrated under *girmit* agreement. But the treatment they met was inhuman and appalling. They have been mistreated and discriminated against all over their areas of migration next, perhaps, only to Africans. They have borne the brunt of injustice, oppression, and racism the world over. They were deprived of their rights in South Africa and Canada, driven out of Burma and Uganda, upstaged in the Caribbean and Fiji and still discriminated against in most Western countries. South Asian – African community in East Africa is the hybrid product of cultural contact between Asia and Africa over many centuries. It is migrant community of South Asian heritage that settled in East Africa long before and during twentieth-century European colonization of Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania. Vassanji belongs to an Islamic sect of Khoja Ismaili of Indian heritage. His ancestors moved to Kenya (British colony) during colonial time. From there his parents moved to Tanganyika (German colony later known as Tanzania) and relocated. After the United Republic of Tanzania came into being in 1964, its economy suffered a setback. Drop in the prices of sisal fiber and coffee led to slump in trade and worker layoffs. This increased resentment of the indigenous Africans against Indians and the Whites. In fact the attitude of the indigenous people to the diasporic Indian trading communities in Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania had been hostile because of their close association with the Whites. The administration in East Africa preferred Indians over Africans because of their sincerity, smartness and hardworking nature. They also used this opportunity to keep indigenous Africans suppressed. In the hierarchial formation of “colonial sandwich”, a policy of social and economic organization during the colonial period, Indians constituted the middle-rung of the society as petty officials, managers in commercial establishments, teachers, artisans and professionals, with Europeans on top and Africans at the bottom. They were considerably better off than native Africans, controlling as they did over four-fifths of the trade and commerce. Many of them, pejoratively known as “duk” owners because of their trading professions, were considered “parasitic” and hated for that reason. They

had no role in anti-colonial struggle and the well-known Mau Mau movement in Kenya in the 1950s. After independence, they were treated as outsiders in most of East African states. In the name of state-sanctioned confiscation of property the shops of the Indian traders were also looted, and their houses as well as estates were seized. Their attitude towards South Asians was like – 'If you came to serve the British colonial government, and they left after independence, then why are you still here?' (Rana Warah, 1998: 26). As a result, a great many of them fled to England, Europe and North America to avoid racial and political persecution at the hands of the right-wing forces and military dictators.

**Reflection of History in *The Gunny Sack*:** In *The Gunny Sack* history is artistically interwoven. History plays here a character; it intermingles and interacts with the present. A movement from past to present and visa versa can be observed throughout the novel. Vassanji has effectively handled history in projecting social, economical and political ongoing struggle of South Asian community in East Africa. History and present overlap each other and transforms the novel into a good piece of literature. Like English playwright Walter Scott, Vassanji consulted historical records but to present the genealogy of Asian Africans. Vassanji's writings draw upon sources from G.C.K. Gwassa and John Iliffe's collaborative edition of *Records of the Maji-Maji Rising* (1967) and Iliffe's *Modern History of Tanganyika* (1979). Madan Sarup in *Identity, Culture and the Postmodern World* writes, "every identity has a history...post-colonial narratives are actually the constructions of their life histories as the writers try to carve a sense of being for themselves" (1996). Here Vassanji converts history into a continuous process of invention 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. *The Gunny Sack* is potent with history and memory and in particular by the ways in which the past and the present interweave. *The Gunny Sack* focuses on the genealogy of Dhanji Govindji's family that suffers natural anxiety which permeates the family in every aspect of its life. The plot centres on the ambiguity of Dhanji Govindji's marriage to Fatima who is of Asian origin and his first sexual liaison with an African slave girl, Bibi Taratibu. The novel is more concerned with the uncovering of a wide range of related family secrets surrounding the death of Dhanji Govindji and particularly, in learning the genealogy of a marginalized motherhood that has Bibi Taratibu as its embodiment and how this is perceived as a betrayal and contamination of the South Asians' pure parentage. Instead

of a straight forward family tree, there are a series of lacunae, as social events are reproduced down the legitimate and illegitimate lines of the family. *The Gunny Sack* ultimately depicts a South Asian family that is unable to come to terms with the fact that its racial heritage is not as pure as it would ideologically like it to be, and that this new hybrid genealogy is constantly repressed in daily life. The death of Dhanji Govindji ultimately forces the family to confront its own psychological blanks and to face up to its past. For the South Asian community, mixed blood, as represented by Juma, is of course unacceptable blood and blood that is regarded as a corruption of the purity of the race. Nevertheless, it transpires that “the fulcrum upon which Dhanji’s tragedy pivots is not racial heritage but material avarice” (Woods, 2007). Hassan uncle’s conversational compliment to Kulsum is quickly qualified as the past of South Asian community’s domination of business enterprises in East Africa as the new political class nationalises the Asian premises in Dar:

“Did you hear? Washed out!” / Kulsum was at her sewing machine deep in thought. She simply / Looked at him / “Did you hear? Washed out I said we are washed out” / “Washed out what brother?” / “Are in which world do you all live? Haven’t you heard? Our buildings own property own houses, All gone. Saaf! Clean! / Nationalized *Mali ya uma*. Property of the masses...” (242).

Pursuing this notion of terror and hurt drives the South Asian community to further seek solace in the West. The present is therefore intricately connected to the past and the past constantly rears its ugly head even as what appears initially a complement turns into an indication of the ugly hidden past. In *The Gunny Sack* colonialism poses a disruption to the South Asian community’s social, political and economic history but the coming of independence in East Africa poses a grave danger. Not only do they have to contend with the alienation and dispossessing effects of independence, but they also have to navigate and negotiate the frequently strenuous and vigorous exclusion and marginalization posed by a deeply-entrenched structure of the mother countries to which they migrate.

**Conclusion:** The treatment of history and memory in diasporic narratives is not simply a case of constituting the lost past of selfhood. The essence of writing this history through memory is focused on the need for individuals to confront their desire for an identity. By allegorizing the structuring of national histories, these diasporic narratives “treat the writing of history as offering a counter-discourse...which exposes the colonial legacy in the discourses of neocolonialism and its traces of nationhood” (Lovesey, 1996). *The Gunny Sack* captures history in the various actions of characters who participate in the process of independence and the migration that occurs thereafter, it also interrogates the meaning of independence and the Queen’s Day which is annually marked in December and is juxtaposed with the day Kennedy was shot dead in November 1963. This is an

attempt at reversing the memory and as such, a signifier of the defiance by remembering other events such as the cricket game between the Hindu sports club and challengers and the football match that was marred by Juju. The image of the South Asians resisting to learn Swahili in school and to carry out menial work, as put in the national policy on education, is a clear indication of how *The Gunny Sack* seeks to work by resisting new ways of life imposed by the independent African leadership. This is an example of a transformative memory where “the narrative acts as a commemoration that not only describes the speaker's relation to the past, but also specifically places him in reference to it, and carries with it an ethical portent and liability” (Soyinka, 1976).

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