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## **Nostalgia, Diasporic Consciousness and Search for Identity in M.G. Vassanji's *The Gunny Sack***

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### **Abstract**

Diasporic writings are invariably concerned with exile, memory, diasporic consciousness, longing for return, alienation, nostalgia, search for identity and sense of belonging. Such traits are evident in the works of M.G. Vassanji. His literary career was launched with the publication of *The Gunny Sack*, the saga of an Asian-African family in East Africa told through the contents of a magic gunny sack. It was his first attempt at fiction. In this novel Vassanji tells the story of four generations of Asians in East Africa. He examines the theme of identify, displacement and race relations. This paper focuses on the search for the origins, in addition to the necessity for self-knowledge and survival on the part of the diasporic self. Throughout the novel Salim Juma negotiates communal and individual identities, the life of the continent of Africa and the

lives of individuals. He explores the past, constructs genealogies and traces the complex formations of the sites of subjectivity through ruptures, dispersal and mutations.

### Keywords

Culture; Identity; Diaspora; *The Gunny Sack*; M.G. Vassanji.

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The “Locality” of national culture is neither unified nor unitary in relation to itself, nor must it be seen simply as “other” in relation to what is outside or beyond it. The boundary is Janus-faced and the problem of outside/inside must always itself be a process of hybridity, incorporating new “people” in relation to the body politic... (Bucknor 11)

Homi Bhabha’s *Nation and Narration* affirms that nation-ness is transitional. South Asian writing in Canada is preoccupied with alienation and displacement. M.G. Vassanji projects the multicultural space like cultural baggage, inhospitality, function of landscape, history, imperialism and multiple identities. These impacts evolve the immigrant writers like Ondaatje, Mistry and Vassanji.

His first novel, *The Gunny Sack* evidently makes use of written as well as oral history and also the autobiographical experiences of the author. At the same time, it blends mythologies and traditions of the narrative forms of Islamic and Hindu Sources.

It depicts Tanzania, where there is fear and embarrassment when the army mutinies - imperial Britain is recalled to restore order. The nation, young and idealistic adopts a naïve socialism and the nationalization of wealth and property but soon there is disillusionment accompanied by growing repression and fear.

The sphere of personal history has been described objectively and subjectively as well in the novel. In the narration of *The Gunny Sack*, the actual

story is presented objectively but the content has emerged critically on the subjective side. These two sides are united in the narration of the novel. Amidst the narration of the actual story-line which has been chosen to present, Kala comments on the temporality and logic of histories that are based on different worldviews.

*The Gunny Sack* deals with the experience of esoteric Indian Shamsi Community in East-Africa over four generations. M.G. Vassanji creates the fictitious religious sect which contains the traits of both Hinduism and Islam. It traces the history of Ismaili community in Zanzibar and Dar-es-Salaam. It covers a time span of 95 years – beginning with the arrival of Dhanji Govindji in Zanzibar from India in 1885 when his grandson Salim continuous the journey his great grandfather started. Four generations are narrated through a sack that has belonged to an old relative of the narrator.

The sack contains all kinds of everyday objects. These objects trigger memories and stories, which are narrated partly by Kala and partly by the sack, which represents the collective memory of the community. The migration of an Indian community from Africa to America has portrayed in the novel. It consists of narration which is connected with memory and history.

*The Gunny Sack*, which has won a common wealth prize in the best first book category was published in 1989. The novel begins with, “Memory, Ji Bai would say, is that old sack here, this poor dear that nobody has any use for anymore” (GS 3). Salim Juma is the narrator. He discovers the past of his own family history and the story of the Asian experience in East African countries such as Tanzania, Kenya and Uganda. The novel interweaves the intimate details of family life and the public events that shaped nearly century of tumultuous history in a place where a dozen cultures met and mingled.

In the novel contains three parts. Each part is titled with the name of the characters such as, Part I - Ji Bai, Part II - Kulsum and Part III - Amina. As the novel begins, Salim Juma in exile from Tanzania, opens up a gunny sack

bequeathed to him by a beloved great-aunt. Inside the sack, he discovers his own family history and the story of the Asian experience in East Africa. In Zanzibar,

...Indians had lived and traded for centuries. There had been others before Amarsi Makan... there was Babu Goss the cutchi pirate, after whom boys had fashioned games and legends and dreams... who plied the seas between Mandavi and Mombasa, the cemoros and Zanzibar. (GS 10).

These relics and artifacts bring them the lives of Salim's Indian great-grand father. Dhanji Govindji, his extensive family, and all their loves and betrayals. Dhanji Govindji arrives in Matamu from Zanzibar, Porbander. He meets the African slave named Bibi Taratibu. She was called Bibi Taratibu, Gentle one; a slave, discarded to an Indian on the slave route from Kilwa. The slave trade was over, but the keeping of slaves, especially women, still persisted on the coast (GS 12).

Dhanji married Bibi and had a son named Houseni. He worked as an apprentice in Zanzibar. Later he moved southwards coast and traded. Five years later, growing in prosperity, he married Fatima. Then Gulam, Abdulla and Naseer are born. Gulam is the first son of Fatima. The whole novel depicts the memory of Ji Bai who is the wife of Gulam.

Dhanji's half-African son Houseini disappears. He sells out his fortune to find him again. As the tentacles of the First World War reach into Africa, with the local German colonists fighting British invaders, he spends more and more time searching. One morning he is suddenly murdered. He had spent not just his own money but embezzled that of others to finance the quest for his lost son. It represents the official historiographic discourse and describes the situation of the Asain family during the war as follows:

It was August 1915, Gulam at twenty-four was mukhi of Matamu in place of his father, now dead more than two years. He and Ji Bai

had a crop of five children, the youngest, Mongi, just over a year old...News of the war reached them through word of mouth and gossip in the village, and dispatches from Sheth Samji in Dar es Salaam. Exports to India and Britain had stopped, there were shortages of food and stock piles were being depleted, and the government had introduced the one-rupee note to conserve metal. Villagers had heard of the Konigsberg - or Koniki - how it was destroyed in the Rufiji... (GS 53)

According to Berger and Luckmann, this is to be expected of an individual person who is in the process of re-socialization:

Since it is relatively easier to invert things that never happened than to forget those that actually did, the individual may fabricate and insert events wherever they are needed to harmonize the remembered with the reinterpreted past. (Berger and Luckmann 180)

African reality does not come through in the Asian community's stories of the past or in the official history from the period of the First World War. Now, the narrator Kala, sees the African dimension of reality as an important component of his past, he connects a passage of African discourse and inserts it into his narration, to fulfil the requirements of his re-interpretation.

Second part of the novel is named as Kulsum. Kulsum is the first daughter of Mitha Kanji and Hirabai. Mitha engaged Kulsum to marry Juma who is the Son of Housein and Moti. Juma married Kulsum. Few years later Moti dies. After a long wait in the unloving bosom of his step family their first child Begum was born. Then she gave birth to Salim (Kala) who is the narrator of the novel and Jamal. It is the 1950's, and whispers are beginning of the Mau Mau rebellion.

Kulsum moves Dar es Salaam with her children after her husband's death. "There lived in this town, then called Mzizima, at the place where sea view now enters like an eagle's beak into the side of the Indian Ocean..." (GS 95). And

gradually Kala takes over the telling and recalling his own childhood. His life guides the narrative from here on. He remembers his mother's store and neighbours' intrigues, the beauty of his pristine English teacher at primary school, cricket matches, and attempts to commune with the ghost of his father. It is a vibrantly described, deeply felt childhood.

When Kala transforms his memories through narration into a verbal objectivism, he also sets up new signifying relations between them. He is conscious of the nature of his activity. He knows that if he were to select other events and memories his reconstruction of the past would be different.

The overall attitude of Africans towards Asians in *The Gunny Sack* is representative of the historical description. The Asians could no longer depend on the support of the major colonial force once represented by the British, and they were threatened by the hostile indigenous population which had recently gained its independence. Deteriorating economic conditions increased African hostility towards Indians. Confiscations of Indian businesses by the state were frequent and deportation of the Asians was on the increase, especially of those who did not want to give up their British or Indian passports. The nationalization of private property finally ruined many Indian families and triggered the dispersal of Asians to Europe and America.

Kala's ambivalent attitude towards Britain is presented in a scene where he watches a parade arranged in honour of the Queen's birthday. He sees the king's African Rifles and the governor, Sir Edward Twining, march by:

You will forget the faces and the contexts but you'll carry the single of those names to your grave... what's in a name, you ask... the sounds of power and authority, the awe and the glory. They will stir inside you, these sounds, when a small part of you in your heart of heart holds back, holds back when they condemn her. (GS 132)

He felt that they are being neglected by the British who once backed them up and created such ideal circumstances for trading and for the maintenance of a certain distance from both African and British colonial society.

Salim meets Amina while doing his National Service at camp Uhuru. Amina is an African and Salim falls in love with Amina at first sight. Salim realizes that his love and relationship with African women are something related to his Grandfather Dhanji Govindji, who married the African women Bibi. He moves on by focusing on his trade and improves his status and then he marries Fatima. Salim becomes a teacher at his old school, and marries, but has a place for Amina in his heart when she returns. He is arrested by the more and more repressive government, and is hurriedly exiled abroad. He leaves his wife and daughter with the promise that he will send for them, knowing that he will not. The novel ends with Salim's loneliness and his lost memories coming out from the gunny sack, hoping that he will be with his family.

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