

Revisiting the Past : An Analysis of M.G Vassanji's *The Gunny Sack*.**Samrat Khanna**Assistant Professor, Dept. of English
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Longowal, Punjab, India**Abstract**

M.G Vassanji is a diasporic author, who revisits the past through the eyes of present. Vassanji has always represented his fictional world as both a multidimensional and yet a neutral world. The search for identity in an alien land and the longing to return to his roots are emphasized and empathized by Vassanji. It is empathized since Vassanji himself was brought up in Tanzania and had moved to Kenya and then Canada. Exile, displacement and dislocation seem to be embedded in the personality of both Vassanji and his characters. He makes it a point to present a situation, theme and a fictional mode modeled particularly on the basis of his experience of a real life situation. Although a writer of fiction but still his characterization follow a dynamic mode. The Khoja Ismaili community to which he belongs is taken by him as a model for constructing a fictional mode labeled as Shamsi sect in his fictions. The real life Khoja Ismaili and the fictional Shamsi community yokes together religious harmony, respect and happiness propagated in the form of 'ginans' or the holy 'bol' which believe in the oneness of God .

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Introduction:

This research paper shall explore the in between fictional world of Moyez G. Vassanji, understanding the past through the eyes of present. M. G. Vassanji can be attributed as one of the exclusive literary person of South Asian Canadian literature. Taking an insight into the biographical detail of Vassanji, he was born in Kenya and grew up in Dar-es-Salaam, Tanzania. He belongs a marginalized Muslim Ismaili sect, hailing from Kutch region in Gujarat. Vassanji's childhood was not very privileged , having lost his father when he was just five, made Vassanji to struggle a lot in life. His family moved

to Tanzania , which was then a part of The British Empire. After attaining his initial education in Tanzania , he moved to America on a scholarship at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), where he studied Nuclear Physics. He further enhanced his academic journey by attaining Ph.D at University of Pennsylvania. He worked as a scientist and a research associate and later ventured into teaching Physics. During his days spent in Toronto he read a lot on medieval Indian literature and history, which sparked up the desire in him to take up writing as a career. His family lineage narrated accounts of his immigrant forefathers, and his journey from Tanzania to America and Toronto acted as a backdrop for all his novels and travelogue. At the beginning of his literary career in 1989 he cofounded and edited a literary magazine *The Toronto South Asian Review* which was later renamed as *The Toronto Review of Contemporary Writing Abroad*. His first novel *The Gunny Sack* was published in 1989, which transformed a Nuclear Physicist into a full time author. Vassanji is the author of six novels , two non fiction works and two collection of short stories. In 1990, Vassanji published *Uhuru Street*, a collection of short stories based on the time spent at a place along the street with the same name in Dar-es-Salaam . This collection of short stories based on the life of Asian community in Dar-es-Salaam gives a glimpse of any port city back home. In 1991 , Vassanji authored his third work *No New Land* . This novel is set in Toronto, it is based on the life of a group of Indians from Tanzania trying to cope up with the life in a new land. It presents the hardships of the minority communities amidst dominant native community. In 1994, the fourth novel *The Book of Secrets* was published. The novel is

the extended version of the experience at *Uhuru Street*. The book got a good appreciation in the literary circle and for this Vassanji was awarded his first Giller Prize. Next novel *Amriika* got published in 1999. The novel is a collection of memories of an Afro-Asian immigrant in America. The novel based on the experiences of Indians immigrated to East Africa.

In November 2003, Vassanji authored *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall* , based on the life of third generation Asians like him in the colonial and postcolonial time in Kenya. The novel got much acclaim and the Giller Prize, for the second time for Vassanji. In 2005 his second collection of short stories *When She Was Queen* also known as *Elvis Raja* in India got published. *The Assassin's Song* based on the sensitive Godra communal riots and its aftermath got published in 2007. The novel received a large acceptance in India especially and has got translated in hindi language as well. Vassanji has authored a travelogue *A Place Within :Rediscovering India* based on his visits to India in 1993 and 2007 . The most recent novel by Vassanji is *Magic of Saida* published in 2008. In 2005, Vassanji was made the Member of Order of Canada. Other than the prestigious Giller Prize he has also won Bressani Literary Prize, and the Harbourfront Festival Prize.

Historicizing Literature:

Literature and history are considered to have originated from the same tree of learning. Critical evaluations earlier have focused on the difference between literature and history, while the recent debate is on the point of similarity between the both.

Aristotle in *Poetics* (1982, 1, 451 a-b) compared historian and a poet based on the subject of their writing . A historian presents what has happened while a poet narrates what might happen, respectively. Historian could only mention particulars of the past while the poet could write based on the probability and possibility of the events which are about to happen. Both history and literature overlap and mutually influence each other on account of being porous genres. The real life or as a matter of fact the truth is presented imaginatively in fiction. This truth on the other hand is historically graphed by the historiographer by his wit and wisdom. The writer of fiction or to say historical fiction , romanticize , fictionalize and generalize the historical past unlike a historiographer who individualize and particularize it. Linda Hutcheon, in *The Politics of Postmodernism*(1989) opines,

“Past events existed empirically; but in epistemological terms we can only know them today through texts. Past events are given meaning not existence by their representation in history” (81).

History itself is the subjective outcome of the objective facts. Historian writes about events and a novelist writes about reasons for the events.

“ Every history is a history of some entity which existed for a reasonable period of time , that the historian wishes to state what is literally true of it in a sense which distinguishes the historian from a teller of fictitious or mendacious stories.”
(M.White 1963, 4)

Both a historian and a novelist problematize a person, issue and a situation. “History is not the past; it is a consciousness of the past used for present purposes” (Denning, 1993:170) The focus of the historian is on the mainstream events while a novelist unravels the anecdotes or to say presents a narrative which can be referred to as counter history. The historical fictions presents a parallel reading of the mainstream history. It is the sedimented voice of the marginalized under the weight of the mainstream. There is a necessity of reconsidering the famous lines by new critic Stephen Greenbelt, “the historicity of text and textuality of history”. There is a need for rereading history retrogressively giving voice to the subjective unheard accounts. These untold accounts are taken up by the postcolonial and immigrant writers allegorically. An author of fiction may construct such fantasies based on the personal experiences, observations, memories and recollections of the past acting as tropes. Linda Hutcheon explains:

“We only have access to the past today through its traces-its documents, testimony of witnesses and other archival materials. In other words, we only have representation of the past from which to construct our narratives or explanations” (Hutcheon, 2002:351).

Juxtaposing past and present in *The Gunny Sack*:

There is a confessional sketching in the works of M G Vassanji. The narrative accounts he represents are not contained in a single world but are the embodiment of many worlds. He does not sketch a linear route for his storytelling but all his narratives

like his life itself are syncretically sketched. He uses fictional Shamsi community to present the Khoja Ismaili community to which he belongs in the colonial and postcolonial time. The setting of his novels is that of Tanzania, Dar-es-Salaam, Kenya, America, Canada and India. Typically diasporic in its function it reveals and recalls the events of exile, nostalgia, memory, nihilism and diasporic consciousness. Most of the novels are based upon the migration of South Asians especially from Kutch region of Gujarat to East Africa in the 19th century. The fictional characters are used by him in the historical time frame to re-present counter histories and narratives. He injects imaginary tales, free play of stories, through which he retrospectively recalls the time foregone through the imaginary eyes of the present. In *The Gunny Sack* (1989) Vassanji presents the saga of migrations from Gujarat into East Africa and their tale full of good or bad experiences. Written in 1989, the book received a lot of appreciation from readers around the globe. Vassanji was awarded the Commonwealth writers prize for the best book in the African region in the year 1990.

The story revolves around an old gunny sack which is a repository of memories, family history, struggle, slavery, colonialism, migration and a ceaseless echolalia of African politics. The past is reconstructed by way of the tit bits of the yesteryears contained in the gunny sack.

“The past is just this much beyond reach, you can reconstruct it only through the paraphernalia it leaves behind in your gunny sack” (127)

The story of the novel mirrors the account of Shamsi community on the lines of Khoja community of M G Vassanji. Although the story starts with the arrival of Dhanji Govindji in Zanzibar, but its three sections are labeled with the names of three ladies Ji Bai, Kulsum and Amina who are the representatives of the different generations to which the fiction stretches. *The Gunny Sack* speaks about the reticent, unexplored anecdotes setting their journey parallel with the mainstream history. The historical phase surrounding these anecdotes is that of Colonial rule of East Africa and its struggle for Independence. These anecdotes which set their journey parallel with this historical phase are that of Indian immigrants trapped between the authoritative colonial white and the suppressed African black. This intersecting position of Asian viz. Indians making them next to the colonial white are seen with an eye of suspicion by the colonized black. The struggle for identity and the dilemma of being in the no mans land, makes them vulnerable. They are constantly seen as striking the balance between both the extremes, the extra white and the excessively black. The interstiality of Indians and their instincts of survival by making East Africa a home away from home comes out true in Kulsum's theory of God's creation.

“When God was well and ready after all his exertions finally to create mankind, he sat himself beside a red-hot oven with a plate of dough. From this fashioned three identical dolls. He put the first doll into the oven to finish it, but, alas, brought it too soon: it came out white and undone. In this was borne the white race. With this lesson learnt, the Almighty put the second doll into the oven, but this time he kept it for too long. It came out

burnt and black. Thus the black race. Finally the One and Only put the last doll inside the oven ,and brought it out at just the right time. It came out as golden brown , the Asian ,simply perfect.” (73)

In the first section of *The Gunny Sack* Dhanji Govindji , the first person of the chain of four generations arrives at Zanzibar in East Africa from Junapur in Gujarat. On reaching Zanzibar like any dislocated member of his community he looks for a mukhi. This aspect of Shamsi community is particular and unique . Dhanji Govindji could survive in an alien land with the help of a mukhi and later in the last segment of *The Gunny Sack* Salim also faces a similar awkwardness in Uhuru camp , where again a mukhi comes to his rescue.

“There was a mukhi wherever there were a few shamsis. And the mukhi would put you up; he would introduce you to the others of the community and he would show you ropes.”(10)

Dhanji Govindji receives an access to the basic amenities with the help of Mukhi. To get rid of his loneliness a discarded African slave Bibi Taratibu is also provided to him. Now the initially helpless and dependent Dhanji Govindji becomes a master of the slave Bibi Taratibu. His illicit relationship with her results into a son with name Husein. Later growing in wealth and prosperity Dhanji Govindji marries Fatima to trigger the journey of two races in one family, one of Husein’s family with their instinctively black creed, and the second of Gulam , a mulatto Indian. Husein marries Moti and Gulam marries Ji Bai, the caretaker of the gunny sack. Both Husein’s and Gulam’s marriages enter in their

fourth generation with grandchildren Kala and Sona named appropriately after their colour . Dhanji Govindji becomes a prosperous Mukhi , but shells out not his wealth and his community's wealth just to search for his half African son Husein. Out of the public outrage of his community members , one morning he is mysteriously murdered.

The second section of the novel is titled as Kulsum, who is the wife of Husein's son Juma and the mother of Salim Juma the narrator of *The Gunny Sack*., Salim Juma adds so many visions of his childhood in this section. Salim's father Juma Husein dies in Nairobi amidst the uprising of the Mau Mau rebellion against the colonial rule. This section not only deal with the struggle of a community but also it reflects a parallel vision of journey of African independence. Kulsum in order to make the both ends meet moves back to Dar es Salaam . It is at this place the narrator decides to unravel the mysteries of the gunny sack to get enriched with his own past. He wants to rest his inquisitive mind of all the queries related to his origin and destination. The narrator recalls the purposefulness of revisiting the accounts of the past , recalling the words of Ji Bai.

“There are those who go to their graves not knowing where they came from...who hurtled into future even as the present yet not over... for whom history was a contemptible record of a shameful past.”(134)

In this section the narrator gives an interesting description of his mother's store, his school , the small encounters in his locality and neighbourhood. This section also describes the racial and political tensions arising out of African call for independence. The Indians and other immigrant Asians struggle to find a safe place, since they are

exposed after the colonial white is dethroned and the colonized black takes the reign. The Asian immigrants and the members of the Shamsi community started fearing unhomeliness and take refuge in England, Canada and United States.

The third section of the novel is titled as 'Amina' an African girl. In this part of the novel the narrator discusses the repercussions of being the progeny of an African grandfather. Salim Juma who by virtue of his inheritance is dark in colour seems to be more of an aboriginal descent rather an immigrant Asian. On account of this he gets selected for his national service camp based at northern Tanzania, amidst all indigenous African colleagues. This proves to be a blessing in disguise since here he finds an acquaintance with an African friend Amina. This phase ironically presents the element of attraction for people of same descent. This relationship does not reach a fruitful end since Amina is physically as well as spiritually against the atrocities meted out at Africans. She turns out to become a human rights activist and leaves for New York. Salim takes the profession of a teacher in his old school. He gets married to an Asian African, and later is blessed with a daughter whom he names Amina. On her return from New York Amina turns out to be a Racial Human Rights Activist thus making the position of her old friend Salim all the more awkward. Salim takes exile in Canada, from where he deciphers the memorabilia of four generations contained in the gunny sack.

The novel is the fictionalized account of Shamsi community, which goes through the journey of survival amidst the colonial oppression, fragmentation amidst the African uprising and displacement after the African independence. The Shamsi community, holds

the position of a fulcrum with the colonial white towards the sky and the indigenous black fixed to the ground. Out of their motif to survive in an alien land it does not mind being labeled as Asian-African community also. In the novel Dhanji Govindji in one of the conversation with his African born daughter-in-law , Ji Bai, illustrates the position of Asians as well as his community in the African habitait.

“As you approach it [Africa] from the sea, as you enter the harbour, you see the right all these beautiful, white buildings of the Europeans...behind his beautiful white European face of the town is our modern Indian district, every community in its own separate area, and behind that the African quarter going right into the forest”(29)

The above citation from the novel stands good both for Asian and Vassanji's Khoja community which has never been completely in affiliation with white or black community, but it has remained a community between the two. The fictional community created by Vassanji with name of Shamsi community is entrapped between home 'there' and 'here'. The talk is not all about the post colonial writer talking about the Empire but there is a nostalgic vision of a distanced homeland. The past however shameful, insignificant has to be deciphered upto its roots. The past is revived in *The Gunny Sack* and restructured , on the basis of the dust of memories which still clings to the gunny sack, this dust is of Zanzibar, Tanzania, Matamu, Kariakoo street in Dar es Salaam , Uhru and Porbander . Dust stands as a metaphor for the time bygone , memories relived and the stories of survival. In the words of the narrator, “Thus past gets buried, but for my drab...the dust of Kariakoo has not been shaken yet ”(10)

Conclusion:

The preserved memories of the past travel in the form of a collective memory, a family lineage or tradition. There is always a need for containing and recalling these memories for getting acquainted with the origin. Vassanji with his scholarly grace has reaffirmed this belief in an article 'South Asian Literature in Canada'. He expresses:

“...Whether the writer stays in his homeland or emigrates ...he attempts to understand the past , and from it the present”(45)

This preservation of memories and the traces of the past are expressed by Vassanji in *The Gunny Sack* in which a gunny sack acts as the collection of memories of four generations. This also stands as a symbol of collective memory starting from Dhanji Govindji to the youngest offspring Salim Juma. The stories of displacement, discrimination, migration, exile, imperialism and independence go together episodically giving the cathartic effects to the readers.

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