

**IDENTITY, DISPLACEMENT AND RACE RELATIONS IN M.G. VASSANJI'S THE  
GUNNY SACK**

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**Abstract**

*The present paper is an attempt to study the Indian diaspora in Africa as portrayed in M.G. Vassanji's Giller Prize winning novel The Gunny Sack. The novel provides a deep psychological rendering of the indentured labour class and presents identity as fluid, shaped by geography, colonialism, and personal narrative. In this paper an attempt will be made to examine the themes of identity, displacement and race relations as depicted in the novel while focusing on the problematic of dislocation and migration. For the purpose of study, the paper will draw from Bhabha's concept of 'in-between' spaces and hybridity.*

**Key words:** Diaspora, identity, race relations, hybridity, indenture

Indian diaspora in Southeast Africa is 3 million strong. Though the history of trade and settlement of Indians in Southeastern Africa may date back to 1<sup>st</sup> millennium AD, but it was during the colonial era that most of this diaspora arrived in Southeast Africa as British indentured labourers to work on the Kenya-Uganda railway. They are present in all regions of Africa. They migrated to Africa for various reasons such as slavery, trade, as indentured labourers, as construction workers, and businessmen. Neha Sinha, in her paper titled "An Overview of Indian Diaspora in Africa: Implications for India" divides the history of Indian migration to Africa in different waves. She writes:

The first wave of Indians was brought to Africa as slaves. However, the first regular migration to Africa started with indentured labourers being hired as agricultural hands... The second wave migrated to South Africa where the Indian workers were taken to Natal under indentured contracts in the late 19th century. Once the time of the indentured contracts came to an end, Indians stayed back in the colonies where labour was still required and in demand. They built railroads connecting East Africa and were accompanied by others who were carpenters, small traders, cooks, cleaners, washermen etc. A significant portion of the railroad workers returned home to India after finishing their work, but some people chose to stay back in Africa... The recent arrivals into Kenya (which we may refer to as the third wave) boasts of investors in the country's vital sectors viz., textiles, floriculture, tele-communications, petro-chemicals, etc. After being displaced from neighbouring Uganda (during the Idi Amin regime in the 1970s), they were invited back into the nation by the Ugandan government when peace was restored in the nation. (6-7)

The present paper is an attempt to study the Indian diaspora in Africa as portrayed in M.G. Vassanji's Giller Prize winning novel *The Gunny Sack*. In this paper an attempt will be made to examine the themes of identity, displacement and race relations as depicted in the novel while focusing on the problematic of dislocation and migration. For the purpose of study, the paper will draw from Bhabha's concept of 'in-between' spaces and hybridity.

Moyez Gulamhussein Vassanji is a highly acclaimed Indo- African- Canadian diasporic writer. Born in Nairobi, Kenya in 1950 to Asian parents, Vassanji moved with his family to Tanzania at the age of five after his father's death. His widowed mother ran a clothing store in Dar-es-Salaam to support her five children. Vassanji received a BS from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and a PhD from the University of Pennsylvania. It was his admiration of Ngugi Wa Thiong'o which gave him the incentive to write about his past. Vassanji was particularly impressed by Ngugi's efforts to recreate the Kikuyus' rich culture and he is convinced that if the peoples of the Third World are to achieve self-respect, they and their compelling complex pasts and cultures must be mythologized through art and literature.

In the novel, *The Gunny Sack*, Vassanji tells the story of four generations of Asians in Tanzania. The novel is both the story of one extended family's arrival and existence in East Africa as well as a repository for the collective memory and oral history of many other African Asians. In this

novel Vassanji examines the themes of identity, displacement, and race relations. He also tries to preserve and recreate oral histories and mythologies that have long been silenced.

The novel reflects the story of a diasporic hero Salim, who is personified with the gunnysack. The gunny sack in the novel acts as a metaphor denoting the diasporic person carrying a gunnysack on his back and going from one place to another. Thus, the title *The Gunny Sack* itself gives a much-defined metaphorical definition of diaspora. Set in East Africa, it is a story of the four generations of Dhanji Govindji who came to Africa from Porbander in India and established his business and family in the village of Matamu. The story is narrated by Salim Juma, who is the fourth-generation heir of Dhanji Govindji from an illegitimate lineage created by Dhanji Govindji's illegitimate liaison with the African slave, Bibi Taratibu. Ironically, in this novel, it is Salim Juma, the illegitimate heir, who becomes the conservator of his family history and identity symbolized by the gunnysack bequeathed to him by his great grandmother. Salim, the narrator of the story, relates many incidents of his life. He remembers his mother's store, his schoolteacher, cricket matches, his father's death, and his attempts to commune with the ghost of his father. The gunny sack, a symbol of inheritance, contains objects and stories that connect Salim to his ancestors. Through these stories, he pieces together his past, understanding his roots and shaping his self-perception. He muses, "Each story in the sack was a fragment of me, a piece of a puzzle I was still trying to complete" (Vassanji 233).

In the novel, Vassanji has very intricately woven the episodes of family life against the backdrop of political turmoil in Africa during Africa's independence and post-independence era. In Africa, Asians held a middle order, as they were used by the colonisers and received a treatment no better than the natives and the natives suspecting their intentions all the time, hated them. After the independence of Africa, the colonised became the colonisers and the Asians were left at the mercy of the new slaves turned masters. In their resurgent nationalism, Asians were further pushed to the periphery as their properties were nationalized and they were forced to migrate from some parts of Africa especially in Uganda where Idi Amin gave nearly 75,000 Ugandans of Asian descent 90 days to pack their bags and leave the country. Therefore, Asians were left with no other option but to migrate to other alien lands like America and Canada. Salim the protagonist saw several members of his close-knit community leave the country for England, America, and Canada. In Tanzania, where Salim and his family lived, the rulers tried to protect the migrants from the violent onslaught of the natives. However, later he was also forced to exile abroad because of his relationship with his unfulfilled love, Amina who was arrested by the

repressive government of Africa for her militant activities. The novel ends with Salim Juma alone, carrying the gunnysack of his past, hoping that he will be his family's last runaway:

Lets this be the last runaway, returned, with one last, quixotic dream. Yes, perhaps here lies redemption a faith in the future, even it means for now to embrace the banal present, to pick up the pieces of our wounded selves... from wounded selves flowers still grow. (268-69)

The novel provides a deep psychological rendering of the indentured labour class. No piece of fiction portrays the heartrending picture of that era as vividly as portrayed in the first novel penned by him, *The Gunny Sack*. In this novel Vassanji presents a very grim picture of the town of Matamu, when the third-generation heir, Salim, also the narrator of the story comes to see Matamu, the town where his "forbear unloaded his donkey one day and made his home" (39). He could not help but remember the time when:

...there used to live and trade here nine Shamsi and seven Bhatia families, the two rival communities on either side of the swamp. Diwali and Idd were celebrated jointly and with great pomp, with procession dances and feasts, surely a sign, as any of prosperity and stability. (41)

But now "perhaps the only visible signs of that period are the ruins of a building, away from the village" (Vassanji 41). Vassanji presents a dismal image of the town when the minority Shamsi community was forced to flee from Matamu after the British annexation of Matamu from the Germans. With few brilliant strokes of his pen, Vassanji brings alive a picture of the deserted village in front of his readers:

The community in Matamu, fifty years old and more, vanished overnight. The traces they left behind were the boarded-up stores, with some possession in them, the empty mosque where Ragavji Devraj and Dhanji Govindji had once presided, the cemetery where they buried their dead, the platform behind the mosque where they assembled for festivities. (49)

The process of dislocation and relocation has never been easy for the immigrants. Vassanji very sensitively brings out the struggle of the immigrant race to survive in a hostile country against every odd. And unfortunately, by the time it manages to settle down, some other problem crops up which snatches away from them their toils and they have to again start from scratch:

We had to start from scratch borrowing and buying on credit, and we opened a small duka in the African section, selling kerosene by the jigger and packets of spice, and our fortunes never rose again, we were Mukhis once, people called us Sharriffu, Germans called us Bwana, but for forty years and more we stayed poor, changing trades, trying this and trying that, moving from here to there. (53)

Vassanji here has presented an intricate, factual, and truthful picture of the plight of immigrant community in post-independence Africa.

M.G. Vassanji, like his protagonist, Salim, is also a figure caught between home- 'here' and 'there.' In one of his interviews he describes his situation with Sanskrit words "neti, neti," meaning "not this, not this yet" (Singh 4). Desire for 'home' in Vassanji's case stretches to eternity as "no new home ever found proves to be home enough to bring one fulfillment" (Mohapatra 3). Vassanji's positionality is very ambivalent and complex because he is placed, as he himself describes in one of his interviews, "just between independence and colonialism, and between cultures, and between religions, and between countries" (Ball, *Taboos* 206).

For Salim, his homeland is Africa only because he has seen no other country. But in the fast-changing political scenario he must prove his loyalty to Africa to be called an African. When Amina, a revolutionary, calls him an Indian, he objects, saying 'I too am an African....' (Vassanji 258) On the other hand, Ji Bai, his grandmother, who belongs to an earlier generation, does not hesitate in accepting her various identities: "Yes, I am Swahili... and Indian and Arab... and European" (Vassanji 228).

Bhabha draws our attention to 'in-between' spaces which provide the "terrain for elaborating strategies for 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" (Bhabha 1-2). Bhabha identifies the spirit of 'in-betweenness' with the cultural condition of people living in the Diaspora. He talks of Diaspora as an interstitial psychic space between the national consciousness and diasporic consciousness. So, according to his view, an immigrant always keeps on oscillating in between these two states of consciousness. The search for identity of an immigrant continues as he is forced to lead the life of a minority. Bhabha states that:

Minority discourse... contests genealogies of origin that lead to claims for cultural supremacy and historical priority... They (do not) celebrate the monumentality of

historicist memory, the sociological totality of society, or the homogeneity of cultural experience. (157)

The novel rejects the conventional styles of nostalgia which privileges the past as an ideal which has now been corrupted, instead when the novel celebrates the past; it emphasizes the hybridity of the South Asian community rather than invoking myths of pure and unadulterated origins. “Rather than imagining East Africa or India as places of stable, nostalgic origins, the novel treats East Africa as site of memory, a mode of material, social and cultural traffic” (Kalliney 9). Memories of Salim, the narrator-protagonist’s school days continues to overwhelm him. He remembers his teacher Miss Penny, for whom he had an infatuation. Her exhortation “Begin at the beginning” (Vassanji 6) reminds him of his origin in Shamsi community in India.

Later in the novel the narrator recalls one of the views of Dar-es -Salaam seen from the inside of a shop:

The thousand faces of Kariakoo... vendors, hawkers, peddlers, askaris, thieves, beggars and other more ordinary pedestrians making their way in the dust and the blinding glare and the heat, in Kanzus, msuris, cutoffs, shorts , khaki or white uniforms, khangas, frocks, buibuis, frock pachedis... African, Asian, Arab; Hindu, Khoja, Memon, Shamsi, Masai, Makonde, Swahili... men and women of different shades and hues and beliefs. (85-86)

The image of Dar-es-Salaam that comes out in this view shows a beautiful crisscross and intermixture of different cultures, races, and nationalities.

We can trace the growth and development of Salim’s character as he and his family undergoes a series of migration. As a member of the South Asian diaspora in East Africa, Salim’s search for identity is shaped by his cultural heritage, colonial history, and personal experiences. Throughout the novel, Salim navigates his fragmented identity, influenced by his family history, racial complexities which lead to his ultimate realization of selfhood.

Salim’s frequent and many migrations, which give a structure of perpetual motion to the novel, leave little nostalgia for him for either India or East Africa. His journey reflects the broader themes of displacement and hybridity in postcolonial literature. Ultimately, *The Gunny Sack* portrays identity as a continuous process of negotiation, shaped by both personal history and external forces.

Devika Narula writes that:

As the individual moves from one cultural space to another, the culture of the land of origin within the immigrant is constantly interacting and contesting with the new culture of the adopted land, so that the transcultural persona/ subject is always in motion, in a process of reconstruction constantly remaking itself and seeking new affiliations. (96-97)

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