Chapter IV

Quest through Memory: *The Gunny Sack and The Book of Secrets*

M.G. Vassanji is a diasporic Canadian writer who depicts the double migration of his South Asian Characters. His characters are mainly Indian Muslims of the esoteric ‘Ismaili’ faith (referred to fictionally as the Shamsi Sect), who made their first voyage to East Africa in the late nineteenth century as part of the labour mobility within the British Empire, working as semi-skilled labourers, small traders and junior colonial functionaries. The second immigration began in the 1960s and 1970s from post-Independence Africa towards Europe and North America.

By narrating the story of Shamsi community Vassanji gives voice to a Canadian experience that has not found its way into literature and public awareness. Vassanji comes in the second category of diaspora who inhabit a liminal position that defines their experience of migrancy. The larger themes he deals with are community values, individual identity, history, effect of colonialism and multiculturalism.

Vassanji’s creative reconstruction of the migrant history of Asian community in Tanzania demonstrates how the narrative becomes an important tangential source to expand our understanding of the way in which identity is negotiated within cumulative migration processes. As Paul White observes, the migration event:

> may seem clear cut in the cold tables of statistical information, yet the event itself lies at the centre of a long drawn out web of personal reflections, adjustments, reactions and repercussions that start in the individual biography well
before the move and which are played out for many years afterwards. (12)

In The Gunny Sack (1989) the original migrator Dhanji Govindji migrated to Africa due to economic reasons as he had seen that those who migrated to Africa became rich and people respected them. Dhanji Govindji wishes the same, so he decides to migrate to Africa, but he and his family still cling to their traditional set of beliefs even after settling down in Africa.

From in between the many worlds that Vassanji occupies and writes about, he has increasingly been identified as “one of the finest younger African Writers” (Brooker50), and a vocal representative of the Asian African community in East Africa. Vassanji undertakes the task of acquainting the world with pre-colonial and post-colonial Africa with the help of narratives involving quests and experiences of several individuals which at times interweave.

In order to write a narrative of a family of Asians from 1885 to 1989, Vassanji draws upon sources from G.C.K. Gwassa and John Iliffe’s collaborative edition of Records of the Maji-Maji Rising (1967) and on Iliffe’s Modern History of Tangayika (1979). Vassanji asserts: “If we don’t write about ourselves, we might as well consider ourselves buried” (qtd. in Malak 277). His belief confirms his ideology as a post-colonial writer who, as Homi K. Bhabha observes, is charged with the responsibility of:

Interven[ing] in those ideological discourses...that attempt to give a hegemonic ‘normality’ to the uneven development and the differential, often disadvantaged, histories of nations, races, communities, peoples. (The Location of Culture56)
Vassanji's novels are the most authentic and detailed elaboration on African life which was not dealt with in earlier novels. His novels are a vehicle of self discovery which define African identity and make the Indians re-discover their cultural roots. He has created and employed African words with English. Madan Sarup in his book *Identity, Culture and the Postmodern World* (1996) mentions that every identity has a history. This observation helps us understand as to why postcolonial writers thematically draw upon the personal, communal and national histories of their people in their respective novels. Sarup is convinced that post-colonial narratives are actually the constructions of their life histories as the writers try to carve a sense of being for themselves. Vassanji's characters' occupy an interstitial or in-between space which is characterised by a division between antagonistic cultures, that is Asian and African. According to Bhabha:

These in-between spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of 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 [...] it is in the emergence of the interstices – the overlap and displacement of domains of difference – that the inter-subjective and collective experiences of nationness, community interest or cultural values are negotiated. ( *The Location of Culture* 98)

When any two cultural worlds meet, the being formed from this union is charged with the relentless quest of trying to find his own identity. Vassanji seems to suggest that when one exists in between several cultures, it is necessary for him to have a distinguishing identity, in this case an in-
between sense of being. Vassanji highlights in his novels a new type of culture which forms when different communities interact. In view of Bhabha’s assertion Madan Sarup further comments on Vassanji:

It seems [...] that he is interested in living and theorizing in the interstices, in and between cultures. In his view, these intervening spaces have a strategic importance. Working on the borderlines, he is very aware of the cultural incommensurability that has to be negotiated. He has drawn attention to hybridization, the process where two cultures retain their distinct characteristics, and yet form something new. (163)

Vassanji’s works represent the convergence of cultures that characterizes both East Africa and Asia. The particular history of immigrant communities once or twice removed from Asia inspires his portrayal of conflicting relationships between individuals and the communities to which they belong. These communities, although always central to characters’ identities, are both provisional and mutable. In the novels the East African coast is just one of the liminal spaces where the first Indian immigrants, the Shamsis from Gujarat, settled in an area already characterized by the cultural syncretism between the Bantu and Arab cultures that produced the Swahili culture. Mary Louise Pratt calls this place contact zone: “the space of colonial encounters, the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations” (6).

Vassanji in Between the Lines: South Asians and Postcoloniality (1996) uses the term ‘Third World’ when referring to South Asian literature. He asserts that the term helps him in framing his own position as
a diasporic, hybrid writer. It allows him to centre a world view of people operating within, across and beneath national boundaries and international dynamics – people whose cultural roots lie strewn around (qtd in Bahri 7). His novelistic reclamation of the narratives of a smaller community marginalised by the authority in main community present an authentic picture of their lives with a focus on how they tried to maintain their identity. As Uma Parameswaran suggests, in Vassanji’s writing “the main point is not so much the politics of a country but the history of a people” (196).

In an interview Vassanji confesses that his writing “is essential for [him] to come to terms with [his] guilt at having left East Africa” (Parameswaran 56). In his novel *The Gunny Sack* this guilt can be read as binding him less directly to the telling of his own diasporic experience and more to the narration of the disenfranchised figures at the edges of the community. Like Vassanji himself his characters are also hybrids who migrate from one country to another. His main idea is to show how migrations affect the identity of an individual. Vassanji’s narrators are

one part archival historian, two parts family genealogist, three parts amateur sleuth and four parts self-conscious theorist with each adding to the intermeshing web of chronicle and conjecture, coincidence and connotation that drives his stories to their ultimate disclosure. (Mehrotra 284)

Vassanji wants to trace the past of the migrant community which is absent from the official records of the country. As Harish Narang observes:

History fascinates Vassanji. If there is one common thread running through all his fiction – novels as well as short
stories—it is his concern of history—history of individuals, communities and nations. Vassanji believed that the fictional mode is a very valid mode [...] for perceiving and writing the history of a society, including that of its individual members.

Stuart Hall says that cultural identity is not a fixed origin to which we can make some final and absolute return:

It has its histories—and histories have their real, material and symbolic effects. The past continues to speak to us. But it no longer addresses us, as a simple, factual ‘past’, since our relation to it, like the child’s relation to the mother, is always ready ‘after the break’. It is always constructed through memory, fantasy and myth. (395)

Vassanji converts history into a continuous process of reinvention 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. Memory, as Govinden observes, “is indeed the weapon not just to reconstruct the past, but to interpret it” (26).

The trope of memory is used to foreground the part of experience ignored or suppressed and to make it accessible to contemporary readers.
The author uses memory as “the metaphorical sign of the interior life to explore and represent dimensions of slave life that the classic slave narrative omitted” (Mobley 357-58).

Vassanji uses memory not in a mechanical, monologic sense to recount and record facts and experiences but in an active, dialogic and imaginative way for a construction or reconstruction of the past. Deviating from the western notion of linear time, he makes his narratives meander through time and space, moving back and forth, and bringing out the various psychic levels of meaning. Vassanji calls the notion of origins into play in his elusiveness. He manages this by weaving memory and myth with history and by embedding imaginary locations in the real topography. The memory of Salim Juma, the protagonist, acts as a symbolic space where he remembers dislocated Asian African experience in East Africa. This remembering includes finding family history which was unknown to him. The imaginary locations are the icons which Vassanji uses in both the novels to store information. He has used the icon of a sack in *The Gunny Sack* and that of a diary in *The Book of Secrets* which store heaps of information which is laid forth in the course of the respective novels. In these imaginary locations Vassanji places his imaginary characters and mixes fact with fiction. In an essay titled “Community as a Fictional Character” Vassanji states:

My literary project [...] has been to trace the origins of a community, its development in a British colony, and finally its dispersal in the postcolonial era. In this way I look at the present century from the perspective of a simple community as it evolves and arrives at a metropolitan consciousness and loses a large part of its traditional identity. One could say that
such a community is acted upon by history, and thus enters historical consciousness. (qtd in George64)

Both the novels begin by introducing the reader to a symbol of accumulated but unorganized and incomplete memories — to a sack in The Gunny Sack and to a diary in The Book of Secrets. In the beginning of both The Gunny Sack and The Book of Secrets one can distinctly feel empty spaces that evoke a sense of loss. There are missing ancestors and missing descendants in The Gunny Sack, and missing details in The Book of Secrets. The readers are placed in between an absent past and uncertain future. In both the novels Vassanji weaves together different strands and different levels of narrative — traditional and modern, oral and written — and draws together the voices remembered and filtered through the consciousness of various characters. Both the novels are polyphonic in nature where Vassanji makes a lot of characters mouthpieces of stories which they narrate. The author indicates in several ways why historical memory might be available to human subjects, to expand our notion of personal experience, to refer to both ways of feeling and ways of knowing, and to include not just individual selves but also collectives — as through the Asian African experience Vassanji also acquaints us with the experiences of their community in the context of how they felt when they were wedged in between Germans and natives and when different parts of Africa were declared independent.

In both The Gunny Sack and The Book of Secrets the quest on which the protagonist embarks is with reference to the historical sense. In both the novels, the historical past concerning origins engages the characters to go back through memories of countless dislocations and ruptures. In The Gunny Sack Salim Juma, the protagonist, who now lives in exile in
Canada, sifts through his ancestral stories, constructs and reconstructs broken personal memories. Like Salim, Pius Fernandes, the protagonist of *The Book of Secrets*, tries to fill in the gaps of a colonial officer’s diary. In Vassanji’s novel the consciousness of cultural identity and origin is possible only through dislocations and rupture, the very conditions on which memory operates.

*The Gunny Sack* and *The Book of Secrets* are both post-colonial and post-modern novels. As postcolonial narratives they articulate the identity of the colonized. Their language displaces conventional English with Swahili and Indian. As Bill Aschroft mentions, Vassanji makes “language variance [...] metonymic [...] of cultural difference” (‘Constitutive Graphonomy’ 71).

Vassanji wishes to acquaint the reader with the African way of life and for this reason he uses African words in the novel. He believes that a man always carries his culture with him which is reflected through language, stories, customs and traditions. The characters in Vassanji’s novels are also people who have migrated from one country to another and they also carry with them their own culture which they transmit to their children, as in *The Gunny Sack* Kulsum, mother of the protagonist, narrates the tales of *Mahabharata* and other Indian stories to her children:

Kulsum would have something for our edification, a story from the mythology... How the five Pandava brothers, once having given their word to their mother to share everything, went on to share their wife. How Tara Rani would steal into the night to pray to her Lord against her husband’s wishes. (149)
Dhanji's first son Huseni is Simba the Swahili term for lion, to his playmates and to Dhanji himself he is 'Bhima' the mythological hero of ancient epic *Mahabharata*. These people clinged to their faith and followed their customs and traditions.

Vassanji makes use of riddles in *The Book of Secrets*. A lot of details of war are presented through riddles. According to Martin Genetsch:

Riddles can be conceived as a form of oral literature projecting indigenous African culture. Riddles are culture specific short tales providing entertaining and insight. Besides a didactic dimension they display a distinct community element in that they require the participation of an audience with which to interact. [...] Riddles thus inscribe an indigenous and therefore alternate epistemology and becomes metonymic of cultural difference. They offer a way for a culture to assert itself in an oppressive colonial situation. Interestingly, riddles by way of their Otherness also contribute to the central concern of the novel with secrets. (54)

*The Gunny Sack* and *The Book of Secrets* are postmodern novels as they embody an experimentalism with the narrative form, with which a rejuvenation of the established conventions of form itself is sought. Kant's theory of the sublime is applicable in both the novels where postmodernism is an avant-garde aesthetic discourse, which seeks to overcome the limitations of traditional conventions by searching for new strategies for the project of describing and interpreting experience. Both the novels "can be seen to contest master narratives of history and progress, to set models of difference, marginality and 'ex-centricity' over
against the centre” (Hutcheon A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction 57) and to refuse closure by hoarding some of its secrets and declining to resolve contradictions. The novels have unusual beginnings which grip the attention of the reader right at the outset.

In both the novels the task of the respective protagonists is to trace a history which is unknown to them. Their quest leads the protagonists to lay forth that part of history of which they had been ignorant. From the earliest times, quest is associated with some sort of journey. The hero has to undertake a perilous journey across a forbidden area, a hideous region in search of a goal. In some cases his journey takes off with no goal in sight, and yet it ends on discovery or a reward of far-reaching consequences. The quest journey is, of course, not always a movement in the temporal and spatial world. It may be an inward movement in search of one’s lost identity or a unifying centre. In such a case the hero is forced to walk through his own self, confronting his inner conflicts, the opposing impulses within. Both the novels of Vassanji taken up for analysis are intertextual in terms of theme and style. Before taking up detailed critical analysis the key events of the novels may be summed up as follows.

The Gunny Sack (1989), the first novel by Vassanji, celebrates the spirit of early Asian migrants from India who moved to East Africa in the early 1900s. Living under German colonial rule, the family of Dhanji Govindji become permanent residents of Africa while witnessing historical events that result in the birth of African nationalism. In this novel, Vassanji focuses on the problematic union of East Africa and South Asia. In Part I of the novel titled as ‘Ji Bai’. Dhanji Govindji arrives in Africa from India and has a son Huseni from an African slave named Bibi Taratibu. After some years he marries Fatima and another son Juma is born to them.
Huseni disappears and Dhanji Govindji spends all his time and money in search of his son. One morning Dhanji Govindji is murdered, and it is discovered that he had not just spent his own money but had also embezzled that of others to continue his search for his lost son.

Part II of the novel is named for ‘Kulsum’ who marries Juma, Dhanji Govindji’s grandson, she is the mother of the narrator, Salim. In this part Salim acquaints us with his life. Tanzania gets independence, the Asians lose their status. In between the episodes of family life, Vassanji charts a complex social structure with imperial centres of power. The colonial powers – the Germans and the English vie – with each other to exploit and enslave the natives. The Maji Maji revolt by natives is crushed. The Indian community is wedged in between. With the surge in racial tension and nationalist rioting, several members of his close-knit community leave the country for England, America and Canada.

Part III of the novel is named ‘Amina’. While at the camp Uhuru, Salim develops an intimate relationship with Amina. Amina is an indigenous African, and their relationship inevitably causes his family anxiety, until the increasingly militant Amina leaves for New York after the national youth training. Salim becomes a teacher at his old school in independent Dar, and marries an Asian African, but secretly loves Amina. He in fact names his daughter Amina. When the older Amina returns from New York where she had turned into a radical human rights activist, she is arrested by the increasingly repressive independent Tanzanian Government. Due to his close acquaintance with Amina, Salim is exiled on safety grounds. He leaves his wife and daughter with the promise that he will send for them, knowing that he will not. The novel ends with the dejected Salim alone in the basement of a flat in Canada.
The Book of Secrets was written in 1994. Vassanji once again picks up the same theme of The Gunny Sack, that is, to trace history. Some of the characters such as Pipa and Sona reemerge in The Book of Secrets. While this novel also deals with migration and displacement, the ultimate meaning of the novel derives its force from personal meanings and rediscoveries. It is a novel of the in-between that explores the border between giving voice to inner longings and remaining silent. The Book of Secrets shows several aspects of the self-revealing process as strands of the story from one life are woven, untangled and rewoven through the threads of other persons’ lives.

The novel spans almost a century and evokes the diverse communities of East Africa, the conflict between colonizing forces and the effects of colonial rule as East Africans work towards achieving independence. The title of the novel refers to a diary that Pius Fernandes, a retired Goan teacher living in Dar-es-Salaam, finds in 1988. The diary written in 1913, belongs to Alfred Corbin, once an English colonial officer in East Africa. Its discovery helps to reveal events that lead Pius to consider his Asian community’s history in East Africa, and the colonial tensions in which the community was caught up. The narrative alternates between excerpts from Corbin’s diary as well as Pius’s reflection on them, and his investigation of the events the diary describes. The diary acquaints us with two other important characters Mariamu and Pipa and the central question of Pipa’s life as to who was Akber Ali’s father. The novel resists a definitive answer to that question, which uncertainty becomes emblematic of the tentativeness of the stage which the narrator reaches at the end of the novel in his quest. “The text freely makes use of postmodern conventions, particularly with respect to its status as historiographic
metafiction, it ultimately seeks to articulate a nuanced politicized postcolonial vision” (Ball 90).

Vassanji’s protagonists, Salim in The Gunny Sack and Pius Fernandes in The Book of Secrets, give voice to their ethnic group. This strategy represents one of the common features of postcolonial narratives, whereby characterization signifies not an exercise of isolation but a deliberate endeavour at contextualizing an individual’s destiny within that of a family, of an ethnic community, of a nation.

Vassanji depicts inter-national migration as Asian African characters leave one contained and defined spatial territory, cross one continent and live in another.

The novels recount migrations, and emergence of hybrid cultures and identities. For this Vassanji selects a narrator Salim Juma Huseni in the The Gunny Sack. He is a hybrid who occupies an in-between space in terms of nation, ethnicity and race. His very name exhibits his cultural hybridity rooted in African and Asian ancestry: Salim in Cutchi and Salim/Salum in Swahili with his nickname Kala from the Indian language. Vassanji chooses a name which he says was selected due to its ambiguity:

[…] my initial reason was to choose a name which was deliberately ambiguous, one which could be both Indian and African, and thus describes my narrator. And Salim lends itself to such a duality, as does Juma, the surname. I knew that both Rushdie and Naipaul had a Salim but that did not bother me. I was doing something different. (qtd in Kanaganayakam 128)
Vassanji’s choice of Pius Fernandes, a historian, as the narrator in *The Book of Secrets* is also deliberate. Pius is a hybrid who has spent forty years in Dar-es-Salaam and still considers himself an immigrant; As he mentions in the Prologue: “in this city where I had no family or close friends and was after all an immigrant” (2). As Martin Genetsch observes:

As a formally colonized subject, Pius Fernandes reads a colonizer’s text against the grain. By filling in the gaps of the Englishman’s diary Pius dismantles colonial discourse from within. He undoes Corbin’s discourse by interpreting gaps as contradictions and decentering the text as the product of a unified subject. Pius engages in a powerful textual practice when he strategically appropriates the colonizer’s voice. By way of destroying the authenticity of Corbin’s textual manifestation, he does to the colonizer that has been done to many a colonized people before: A silencing of (indigenous) voice and thus a marginalization of (native) culture. In this way Pius’s engagement with Corbin is also a settlement of accounts that asserts a new cultural dominance and self-confidence for postcolonial Tanzania as a nation. *The Book of Secrets* is a poetic revenge directed against those responsible for political injustice. However, this is not the end of the story. For whereas Pius metonymically deconstructs colonialism by debunking one of its core tools, i.e. the book, his destruction of the surface structure of Corbin’s diary results in the construction of a new text, a new story.(52)

The first epigraph of *The Gunny Sack* is from a poem of W. B. Yeats:
From man’s blood-sodden hearts are sprung
Those branches of the night and day
Where the gaudy moon is hung
What’s the meaning of all song?
“Let all things pass away.”

The epigraph in a way suggests that the past is part of one’s life; one should acknowledge it and then let it go. In the second epigraph Vassanji has first written few lines in an African language and then translated them into English. It says:

enga taa katika pepo
haiziwiliki izimikapo sasa mi
huano izimishiyo

Behold the lantern in the wind
now beyond help
you see it extinguished

Through these lines Vassanji seems to suggest that though he has migrated to Canada, he still retains his ties with Africa through language.

The epigraph of The Book of Secrets consists of lines from ‘The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam’.

I passed by a porter the day before last,
He was ceaselessly plying his skill with the clay,
And, what the blind do not see, I could –
My father’s clay in every potter’s hand.
The epigraph suggests that each and every person's life is in a way linked to each other where he not only has an individual existence but a collective existence as well. This is what the novel is all about. It drags all characters together making their life in a way linked to each other.

Breaking away from the conventional modes of nineteenth century English novels, the narrative in The Gunny Sack begins not from the beginning of the narrator's life but by introducing us to a sack which is a repository of collective memory and becomes almost an icon. The sack belongs to Ji Bai, an ancestor of the narrator. In choosing not to hand the sack to her own family but to the descendants of Dhanji Govindji's other wife, Ji Bai makes a gesture of belongingness and redemption.

She wants to acquaint the narrator with a past which is unknown to him; Richard Terdiman in his book Present Past: Modernity and the Memory Crisis (1993) elaborates on the fact that "memory is the modality of our relation to the past, it is the faculty that sustains continuity in collective and individual memory, and it is a means through which the past reveals itself to, and shapes, the present" (9).

As Terdiman notes, memory's tendency to become intertwined with cognitive processes makes the resultant generation of meaning highly intricate. Memory forms an important constituent of the novel. It signifies the loss of space called home but also propels the migrants to create a home away from home. Memories also bear out that identity of the migrants does not rest in fixed cultural signifiers. Memories also bring to the fore not only the essential difference between first and second generation migrants but also the fact that identity is evolutionary and ever-changing.
The novel *The Gunny Sack* emerges from multi-cultural spaces, contains interpretations from multiple voices and relies mainly on collective memory through the process of storytelling. As G.D. Killam remarks:

The gunny sack is a repository of family history, a Pandora’s box of memories and mementoes and operates as the organizing metaphor of the novel. The memorabilia that Salim takes from the gunny sack refresh his memories of the oral history of the family and cause him to dig further into the cause and effects of events associated with the gunny sack’s contents. (22)

The gunny is a mixed bag of shameful but also usable parts of the past, which the original owner Dhanji Govindji had hidden away from view to keep the family name respectable. The mementoes consist of a bead necklace, a photograph, a cowrie shell, a brass incense holder, a Swahili cap, a broken rosary, a blood-sustained Muslin shirt and three books.

The gunny, according to Ji Bai, will act as a Pandora’s Box for the one who opens it; she says, “He who opens it will suffer the consequences” (4), as he will have to trace the past in full detail. The novel begins with an address to memory:

Memory, Ji Bai would say, is this old sack here, this poor dear that nobody has any use for any more. Stroking the sagging brown shape with affection, she would drag it closer, to sit at her feet like a favourite child. In would plunge her hand through the gaping hole of a mouth, and she would
rummage inside. Now you feel this thing here, you fondle that one, you bring out this naughty little nut and everything else in it rearranges itself. (3)

Ji Bai begins by saying that memory is of no use to the youngsters. Her great grandson Aziz gives the sack to Salim, her illegitimate greatgrandson. The sack contains all the details of their lives.

The gunny sack that Aziz brings stands explicitly as a metaphor for an indestructible past that an immigrant community cannot reject. Each passing generation gives the bundle of the past to the next generation. Aziz wishes that Salim should burn the sack. But Salim takes up the task of revisiting the past. The sack contains some specific items which are all related to a story. When one item of the gunny sack relates a story the other stories rearrange themselves for getting narrated.

If in *The Gunny Sack* stories come out of a sack, in *The Book of Secrets* there is a diary which is a repository of memories of a colonial officer which, however, interweave with the lives of the natives and immigrants. Vassanji strikes his mysterious note once again right at the outset. The prologue begins as follows:

They called it the book of our secrets, Kitabu cha siri zetu; Of its writer they said: He steals our souls and locks them away; it is a magic bottle, this book, full of captured spirits; see how he keeps his eyes skinned, this mzungu, observing everything we do; look how meticulously this magician with the hat writes in it, attending to it more regularly than he does to nature, with more passion than he expends on a woman. He takes it with him into forest and on mountain, in war and in
peace, hunting a lion or sitting in judgment, and when he sleeps he places one eye upon it, shuts the other. Yes, we should steal this book, if we could, take back our souls from him. But the punishment for stealing such a book is harsh—ai!—we have seen it.

They were only partly right, after all, those wazees — the ancients—who voiced wonder—filled suspicion and mistrust at the book and its writer, the all-powerful European whiteman administrator who had appeared in their midst to govern. They could not know that this mzungu first and foremost captured himself in his bottle-book; and long after if left his side—taking part of him with it—continued to capture other souls and their secrets, and to dictate its will upon them. Even now it makes protagonists of those who would decide its fate.

Because it has no end, this book, it ingests us and carries us with it, and so it grows.

The colonizer’s version of the natives as well as his acts of the distant past continue to occupy the natives efforts to define themselves.

Amin Malak reads clear postcolonial resistance in the text, arguing that the novel “makes its intervention by cleverly creating a colonial text, taking the form of a diary, the titular book of secrets, and then situating it within context that foregrounds the limitations of the colonial perspective with necessarily condemning it outright” (175).

The diary of Alfred Corbin, the novel’s central symbol of colonial authority, may represent on one hand what Chris Tiffin and Alan Lawson
identify as the containment and control of imperial textuality (qtd in Ball 100). It contains secrets and even the soul of Mariamu, and it affects and inhibits Pipa for most of his life.

Part I of the novel is titled as ‘The Administrator’. In this part Vassanji gives details of Corbin’s adventure. It has two epigraphs: the first one consists of lines by Sir Thomas Browne which say:

We carry within us the wonders we seek without us;
There is all Africa and her prodigies in us.

These lines in a way suggest that we all have traces of savagery in all of us but this depends on the individual how to cope with it. This is shown in the novel by forming a dichotomy between Maynard and Alfred Corbin who are both colonizers but use different methods while dealing with the natives.

Corbin the colonizer was himself enchanted to go to Africa. He left all the comforts of his native place and himself volunteered to come to Africa. One of his early musings before reaching Africa:

It was impossible to surrender to sleep with the knowledge that finally I was entering the interior of Africa... the huge and dark continent that had defied the rest of the world for millennia, now opening up to European civilization, to a great Empire of which I was a minor but privileged functionary. ‘Life and Soul’, Mr Churchill had said. My body had blistered in the heat and swelled to the bites of insects, and as I lay on the most uncomfortable bunk the Uganda Railway possessed, my soul was stirring. (23)

He went Africa
to administer in the name of his king and nation, to bring the land into the twentieth century in as painless a way as possible, in the belief that the British Empire with its experience of ruling other lands and with its humane system was the best nurturing ground for an emerging nation, for backward Africans and Orientals to enter the society of civilized peoples. (30-31)

Corbin’s work was:

- arbitration and administering British justice. The former took cajoling, reasoning, using threats or the lock up, always with native custom as guide. But imposing British justice was like constructing a marble edifice, irrelevant and alien to people governed by their own laws and ways of doing things. (32)

As Anne McClintock points out, male European colonizers are the “most direct agents of empire” (5), and Alfred Corbin’s position endows him with power and authority that expand beyond the status as an individual colonial administrator Corbin may not be able to make laws: “My powers are modest” (30) he says; but he represents the ideological and physical violence inherent in empire-building. Corbin exemplifies the ‘white man’s burden’ as he takes on the paternalistic role of guiding, administering, and disciplining the local Shamsi community.

In the town where Corbin administered all races lived and “There were regular football matches in town, in which all the races participated” (33). Corbin then becomes involved in this landscape, he is curious about the native customs and traditions; he gives full details about these in his diary. He is then linked to a girl Mariamu, whom he saves from her
community when she is ill-treated by them. Mariamu lives with Corbin for a certain period of time, with whom people suspect that he had developed a relationship. His diary compels Pipa, husband of Mariamu to keep this diary because he believes in the fact that the secret of Corbin-Mariamu relationship is mentioned in the diary. Mariamu is relegated to the margins but she remains an enigmatic figure throughout the novel. Corbin describes Mariamu as follows:

I do not know what to make of her — the impetuous girl who walked in past my askari and spoke directly to me, then the silent girl who left chapattis for me on Thursdays, and girl humiliated by the maalim’s switch, the proud girl holding her uncovered head high and staring directly at me, and now the quiet and shy housekeeper. Which is the real one? (78-79)

Corbin’s diary has the mysterious power of gripping the reader by making him a part of the story as it does in the case of Pius Fernandes who is linked to Corbin through the attempt to understand and assess the value of the diary.

_The Gunny Sack_ and _The Book of Secrets_ have a quest motif but these novels are very different from the bildungsroman genre, as the individual quest for selfhood and identity is replaced here by the quest for a collective and communal identity. The Asian African characters in the novel are in one way or the other trying to trace their roots in Africa. This quest for a sense of belonging in a way connects the life of Dhanji Govindji with his greatgrandson Salim Juma in _The Gunny Sack_ and the life of Pius Fernanades with Alfred Corbin in _The Book of Secrets_.

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When Salim acquires the sack he names it as Shehrzade, or Sheru who would acquaint him with the past. First of all the narrator is fictionalized and later the subject will be fictionalized. He presents the sack as follows:

It sits beside me, seductive companion, a Shehrzade postponing her eventual demise, spinning out yarns, telling tales that have no beginning or end, keeping me awake night after night, imprisoned in this basement to which I thought I had escaped. (6-7)

This Shehrzade is similar to the Shehrzade of Arabian Nights that keeps on narrating tales of the past which in a way becomes a kind of quest. As Rosemary Marangoly George observes:

the fear of impending death forces the Shehrzade into weaving endless tales from the loom in order to eternally postpone death in the Arabian Nights, the fearsome possibilities of marginalization and epistemic death in an overwhelmingly powerful host culture compel the diasporic self to churn out narratives for cultural survival. Sheru’s endless tales of/for self survival curiously parallel Vassanji’s own story of a nondescript migrant writer in an alien land, struggling for identity and cultur[al] survival. (168)

This is what Vassanji has once again done in The Book of Secrets: here Pius Fernandes the protagonist is engaged in searching through the past. The diary belonged to Alfred Corbin and was of ‘Explorer’ variety: this in a way suggests exploration on the part of Pius, who would explore
the details of this diary. Pius at once forms a connection with the diary. He begins:

Even before I began to pore over Corbin’s entries which would subsequently so grip me, I could not help but feel that in some mysterious manner the book touched our lives; was our book... (7)

He assigns himself the task of filling the gaps that exist in the diary. He says:

... And so I would construct a history, a living tapestry to join the past to the present, to defy the blistering shimmering dusty bustle of city life outside which makes transients of us all. (8)

Alfred Corbin’s diary Pius says, will be tracked by the narrator like a wild animal;

a trail that it followed would reveal much about the lives and times it witnessed, and tell us why the diary finally surfaced where it did. (8)

The narrator’s effort to decrypt Corbin’s diary and to revive “the spirits of the book itself” (8) is made similar to Corbin’s inability to adjust in Africa. De Certeau describes the very ‘frontiers’ on which Vassanji’s novel operates:

the frontier of historiographical discourse where a past is chained and made to speak ventriloquistically by the ‘mastery’ of the present, where a mute or incomprehensible ‘Third World’ is brought into European discourse through acts of invasion, interpretation, and translation by the first and
where a firmly entrenched frontier is established between the ‘present’ and the ‘past’ as between the ‘civilized’ and the ‘uncivilized’. Through this historical process, the ‘raw material’ of facts and documents becomes a variant of a colonized ‘savage land’. (157)

Pius gives us visual details of Alfred Corbin’s life as if he can see him through the diary. In the first few pages of the diary Corbin gives the details about how he was interested in going to Africa. His account resembles that of Marlow in *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad who also presents the reader with a similar ambivalent picture of Africa.

The diary exists as a fragment. Pius makes attempts at reconstructing the accounts in Corbin’s diary by inserting sections between two separate entries and speculating on the possible meanings. As Corbin’s entry from 3 March 1913 mentions the Mombasa club, while the entry from the previous day ends with Corbin’s arrival in Kenya, the linkage is required on the part of Pius so that proper coherence is formed. The entries of 4 March 1913 and 17 March also demand his intervention. In the first entry Corbin writes about a tour around Mombassa, while in the latter we learn that he is already posted to the small town of Kikono. Pius guesses that Corbin must have met Frank Maynard, who was a Captain in the King’s African Rifles. Corbin presents their interaction and Maynard’s views on Africa. In order to trace all the details of the diary Pius goes to places mentioned by Corbin in the diary. He constantly thinks about the places mentioned by Corbin just to make his own interpretation more authentic:

So many times in the past few weeks I have seen this town, this area, in my mind as it must have been eighty, ninety
years ago, imagined the thousands of troops and animals on the march across the dry land, digging in battle lines, relinquishing them, the guns firing, the bayonets thrusting, the disease and thirst and death. Now to be here... the feeling is eerie, unreal. (175)

Pius wonders at the task which he has overtaken: “History drifts about in the sands, and only the fanatically dedicated see it and recreate it, however incomplete their visions and fragile their constructs” (175). In order to present an authentic and detailed view of Corbin’s life Pius seeks help from Sona who was Pius’s student and is now a historian in the United States.

The historian Sona is also present in *The Gunny Sack* where he is the brother of Salim. In order to interpret the books of Dhanji Govindji, Salim seeks Sona’s help. In order to exchange letters Sona and Salim decide that they will use their nicknames Sona and Kala where Sona or brightness will help his brother Kala, darkness to come to light. He is the one who actually persuades his brother to open the books:

... I say let’s open the books and find out what the old man was up to! (15)

At present Salim is in exile in Toronto. From this vantage point he would look at the history of his community. He says: “Light drifts in through the one window, and I have already discovered a pastime for the daylight hours. I follow footsteps” (7).

Salim asks the sack to begin the stories from the beginning, ‘Beginning’ is what interests Vassanji. The sack starts narrating Salim’s life stories but then Salim asks the sack to narrate the story of his
greatgrandfather Dhanji Govindji. At once stories appeared as drifting images.

Images like confetti, like cotton lint in Ji Bai’s mattress shop, drift through my mind haphazardly, each one a clue to a story, a person. A world. Sounds knock in my brain demanding entrance, rude gate-crashers jostling for right of way, until I in a dizzy spell say, All right, now what, Shehrbanoo? Leave this magic. (7)

It appears that images like confetti appear which are all from one paper but have assumed different stories – each piece a new person, who is part of an altogether new story.

The first story which comes out of the sack is that of Dhanji Govindji, how he migrated to Africa. Dhanji Govindji’s migration to Africa was due to the ‘push’ factor, as in India economic difficulties cropped up and people who went to Africa came back as rich and successful.

Men returned from Zanzibar invariably rich; and when a bullock cart entered a village carrying its exotic passenger from abroad, gangs of boys would usher it in, with cries of ‘Africa se aya hai! Africa se aya hai!’… If one of these boys got into trouble, ‘Go to Africa’ they told him. (8)

Africa, the dark continent, offered lucrative business opportunities to the trading communities of coastal Gujarat, in particular the Memons, Bohras, Khojas and Baniyas of Saurashtra and Kutch. And so in the nineteenth century they began to settle down and set up shops among the natives of the East and South Africa.
Dhanji Govindji describes the topography of Africa. Salim tells us how Dhanji Govindji converted into an 'Ismaili':

Dhanji Govindji. How much lies buried in a name... Dhan, wealth; Govind, the cowherd butter-thief gopi-seducer, dark Krishna. A name as Banya in its aspiration for wealth as Hindu; yet gloriously, unabashedly, Muslim. For the esoteric sect of the shamsis there was no difference. But Govindji, the elders will now tell you, is not a family name – where is the attak, the last name, that can pin you down to your, caste, your village, your trade? Absent, dropped by those to whom neither caste nor ancestral village mattered any longer. Later this irksome Govindji too was dropped by one branch of the family and replaced with Hasham... (12)

The later generations of Dhanji Govindji dropped their Hindu names as they identified with the Islamic culture and considered themselves Muslims. The Shamsis' ethnic identity, while enduring in the diaspora, becomes transformed as it comes into contact with other ethnicities and cultures. It is clear that Vassanji's novel presents us with a form of diasporic identity that is not dependent upon homeland. The Shamsis “constantly produce and reproduce themselves anew, through transformation and difference” (Hall 244). And the transformations and differences appear along various socio-cultural borders of the community, especially those of religion, race, ethnicity, gender, language, social status and classes. Socio-cultural borders are, to a certain degree, unfixed since they relate to ethnicity and ethnic identity. As Roy Chow observes, that “Ethnicity signifies the social experience which is not completed once and for all but what is constituted by a continual, often conflictual, working –
out of its grounds” (143). Thus, the socio-cultural border becomes the site where ethnicity is worked out, and these borders are crucial to the survival and cohesion of the community.

The Shamsis in Africa are like the colonizer who had brought with him his own preferences and prejudices. In the two binary opposites, Indian and African, everything African such as colour, physical features, food, dress, cultural practices is considered inferior. Armed with an innate sense of racial superiority, the incoming Indian migrants play out the same role vis-a-vis the black Africans that was played out by white colonizers in non-white colonies. Soon after Dhanji Govindji arrives in Zanzibar he buys a woman slave Bibi Taratibu, whom he later leaves after his formal marriage to a woman of Indian origin.

Like his father, Juma (Salim’s father) finds solace in friendship with an older African woman, Mary; a kind of surrogate mother for him. However, during the Mau Mau rebellion, Juma and his wife Kulsum betray her by handing her son to the police, who is a suspected rebel. Salim wonders at this situation and says that Africa would have been different if interracial marriages had been allowed. He says:

Tell me, Shehrbanoo, would the world be different if that trend had continued, if there had been more Husenis, and if these chocolate Husenis with curly hair had grown up unhindered, playing barefoot in Kanzus and Kofias clutching Arabic readers... (14)

As Arun Prabha Mukherjee notes, “The ‘using’ and ‘discarding’ of Bibi Taratibu becomes a trope for Indians’ relationship to their adopted land” (175).
With the intervention of Govindji’s legally wedded wife, Bibi Taratibu is pushed to the margin, to the forest -- a place reserved for nature and half castes. Vassanji tells us that colonialism may have been harsh and exploitative but for the people of that era, especially Asians, it came in a different guise where they considered themselves superior to native Africans. So when Huseni keeps a connection with his mother he is rebuked by Dhanji Govindji. He is forced to choose between his Indian father and his African mother, between ‘the solar race’ and ‘slaves’. Huseni however rejects both; he becomes a being who forever walks in the forest in search of himself. As he is a hybrid, the Asian community does not accept him fully due to his African matrilineage and paradoxically also condemns him if he keeps any connection with Africans. Thus he is a being who is devoid of the sense of belongingness because Asians with whom he lives makes him aware that he is an ‘outsider’. He however considers himself a member of the family and takes care of his younger brother Juma.

Huseni’s disappearance inspires his father’s quest and the father tries to find his son. Govindji accepts the fact that he has failed to keep his family together. He goes to a lot of places but his search proves to be futile. For continuing his journeys he not only uses his own money but also the money of the community which people had deposited with him for helping people of the community in India. Due to this embezzlement of money Govindji is murdered by some unknown men. The family members believed that he was murdered by their own community members. The first section of the book ends with the unraveling of the sin of the family on which they had maintained their silence.
This was the sin Ji Bai mentioned, the guilt which they carried silently in their breasts, with the knowledge that there were people, there were families, who knew of it and could point figures at them. (67)

When the sack acquaints Salim with Dhanji Govindji’s futile journeys and Huseni’s disappearance, he wonders at his own position. It appears to him that this ‘running’ away from situations is in his genes. He contemplates:

The question that comes to mind is: in coming here, have I followed a destiny? Satisfied a wanderlust that runs in the blood? Or do I seek in genes merely an excuse for weakness, an inability to resolve situations? Perhaps it is this weakness that’s in the blood: can you distinguish such weakness from wanderlust? When does a situation become impossible enough to justify escape? (80)

Salim like Dhanji Govindji is unable to resolve situations. He is unable to solve the dilemma whether to live with his family or to live with Amina. Salim further comments:

I too have run away, absconded. And reaching this grim basement, I stopped to examine the collective memory – this spongy, disconnected, often incoherent accretion of stories over generations. Like the karma a soul acquires, over many incarnations, the sins and merits, until in its final stages it lumbers along top-heavy with its accumulations, desperately seeking absolution.

I like my forefathers before me, have run away. (80)
Salim Juma's legacy of miscegenation from his grandfather Huseni assigns him a hybridized identity which is troubled with a search – A search for selfhood that continues down the generations. He says that his soul seeks liberation. One can get liberation when one is at peace with one's own self and this peace can only be attained when one solves the riddles agitating one's mind. Salim feels he will attain peace when he knows each and every detail of his family history. The novel is not only the story of Shamsi community but also of other marginal stories:

Once when the water subsided, an Indian woman's body was dragged out... rotting flesh, fragments of a sari, unclaimed, not missed... Suicide, they said, or murder; what matter? Perhaps she could not bear a child. Perhaps she did not bring a good enough dowry. Why this fragment, Shehru, this frayed remnant of a memory? A tribute, she says, to an unknown woman, a woman with her own memories and her own world.

(135)

While narrating the stories of the sack, Salim at times makes his own assertions and tries to trace information on issues on which the sack has no clue. One such instance is when the sack tells of Bibi Taratibu and Huseni's disappearance but does not tell about Bibi Taratibu's family and her later interaction with her son. Salim wonders:

Tell me, you who would know all... what was she like, this gentle one, this Bibi Taratibu given to my ancestor for comfort [...] From what ravaged tribe, gutted village, was she brought to the coast, and did she not also think of her home, her slaughtered father and uncles, her brother and sisters also taken away...
She demurs, my gunny sack. Slave women, she says, wore a colourful cloth round their bodies, under the shoulders. She must have been dark dark, because she came from the interior. And technically she was not a slave, because the British government of India had forbidden its subjects to keep slaves. Other than that? Surely there must have been something between this slave woman and her son Huseni, for he kept on seeing her against his father’s wishes, against respectability… (29)

In the novel one finds that the voice of the woman is absent who is left alone by her husband. First Bibi Taratibu is left by Dhanji Govindji, Moti his daughter-in-law by his son Huseni, and then his great grandson Salim also leaves Amina and marries Zainab.

Like The Gunny Sack, Vassanji in The Book of Secrets presents the hostility that exists between the different ethnic groups and at the same time bears witness to the norms that rule the social relations between the rich and the poor, Muslims and Christians, Asians and Africans.

A crowd gathers as Alfred Corbin, the new colonial administrator assigned to Kikono, approaches the town: “The Indians formed a straight line, as Swahilis stirred” (28). The differences between the various ethnic groups in Kikono show how this town is marked by socio-cultural borders. Kikono, a small town near the border of the German Tanganyika colony and British East Africa, contains two distinct groups of Asians, the Shamsis “in white drill suits and red or blue fezzes” and other Asians in “dhotis and turbans” (26). Among the Africans, the narrator identifies the Swahilis, “in kanzus and embroidered caps” (26).
Corbin, the colonizer, distances himself from the natives because he considers himself superior. The natives ask him to kill a snake as they also consider him superior. Although Vassanji clearly wishes to tell the untold story of the natives and the Asian Africans in his fiction, he does not forget to contrast the higher status of Asian Africans than that of the black Africans who are relegated to the bottom rung of the social hierarchy. Thus, Kikono society is stratified. As Shane Rhodes writes in his essay on The Book of Secrets:

> from the start this sets up some interesting paradoxes emblematic of the society of East Africa itself where there exists no simple binary of ‘slave and master’ but rather a three-part structure (and even this simplifies a much more heterogeneous society) of relations between the British whites, ‘immigrant’ Indians, and indigenous blacks.(182)

This construct is a product of British colonialism. “By its very structure, colonialism is regionalist and separatist. Colonialism does not simply state the existence of tribes; it also reinforces and separates them” (Fanon 94). Thus the straighter line that the Indians form reflects their complicity with and dependence upon the colonial system. As Corbin mentions, “Powerless though the individual Indian is beside European, as a community they have a voice that is heard” (48). The Swahilis’ stirring reflects their unease and represents a form of resistance.

The following passage illustrates the highly structured hierarchy that existed within the external hierarchy of black beneath brown, brown beneath white:
Dar es Salaam was an important place. It was the residence of the German Governor. There were many Europeans, many officials, whom it was best to avoid. Visitors poured in from the harbour. Within minutes a street could be cleared to make way for a dignitary – on a horse, in a motorcar or rickshaw, or even on foot. There were people – from the interior, mostly – who would go down on their knees in fear when a dignitary passed and humbly touch the ground with their heads lest they offend. In a place like this there were many rules and regulations, and a police force to see that they were obeyed. It mattered who you were, where you belonged: you were your tribe, caste, religion, community. (133)

Vassanji’s shamsi characters have an ambiguous relationship with the colonial governments. As a trading community, the shamsis were indispensable to the colonial establishment, first to the German and then to the British. According to Peter Simatei:

Vassanji [...] is not interested in constructing a discourse overtly oppositional to the colonial one. This certainly has something to do with the position occupied by the East African Asians in the racially layered colonial system where they were more part of the colonizing structure than a colonized people. (82)

The novel clearly makes a parallel between the colonizer and the colonized where the colonized are expected to pay a kind of homage to the colonizers. The shifting loyalties reveal that for the Indians:
Among the trading immigrant peoples, loyalty to a land or a government, always loudly professed, is a trait one can normally look in vain. Governments may come and go, but the immigrants’ only concern is the security of their family, their trade and savings. (52)

Vassanji’s description of the town of Kariakoo in *The Gunny Sack* also presents this racialist consciousness which was adopted by the people:

There were three dreams in this town that aspired to Baghdad once and New York afterwards. The European dream stayed near the seashore. Everything beyond Ingles street up to the ocean in the north and east was Uzunguni, “where the Europeans live”. Whitewashed tree lined breezy: dreamlike. Huddled behind the Europeans, crowded, came the Indian quarter, with its dukas of groceries, produce and cloth: gutters overflowing and smelling at street corners, rotten potatoes, and onions smelling outside the produce shop, open garbage smelling in the alleys. Then came a breathing space from European and Asian [...] the Mnazi Moja ground, uninhabited, uncultivated, a sandy desert: beyond this, in the interior, was Kariakoo, formerly home of the German Carrier Corps, the beginning of the African quarter. Only a few streets ventured, from the Indian quarter, into the African quarter but once inside, got lost in the maze of criss-crossing, unpaved streets lined with African huts. (105)

In the second section of *The Gunny Sack* Salim narrates his personal story as to how they survived after his father’s death. His mother Kulsum’s life is also a quest for identity where first of all she asks her husband to
shift to another house. Then after her husband’s death she migrates to Kariakoo where she sets up a business. She strives hard to keep her children safe when Africa witnesses bloody revolution for independence. She does not readily accept family ties with Ji Bai as she does not want to be associated with Dhanji Govindji’s family who has committed an atrocious sin.

Salim recounts his first meeting with Ji Bai and describes how Ji Bai acted like a prophet and had said:

“Well listen, son of Juma you listen to me and I shall give you your father Juma and his father Huseni and his father…”

(166)

Ji Bai’s statement in a way highlights Salim’s own point of view that his name chose him to witness the family history:

How much in a name? Salim Juma the name chose me, and it chose my future and this basement in which I hide myself with my gunny. (133)

Ji Bai acquainted Salim with that part of his family history about which Salim was totally ignorant. He remembers his first look of the gunny:

I remember my first view of Shehrbanoo... a dumpy gunny sack enclosing a broken world, the debris of lives lived... slumped in the inner room beside Ji Bai’s bed, her mouth closed with a sisal twine. Ji Bai untied the loose knot, instantly a smile appeared on the gunny where there was a grimace before and that laughing mouth was never shut…

(166-67)
As Ji Bai unties the twine, she will solve some of the questions which Salim encountered in his life as to why he is addressed as a ‘half caste’. The gunny starts laughing and this laugh is a malicious laugh as the gunny will trap Salim in his family’s past from which Salim thought he had escaped. He accepts the task of following the ‘footsteps’ of his ancestors. As *The Gunny Sack* is a novel about Asian-Africans, Vassanji describes in detail how these people tried to survive and succeed in the host culture. Loyalty, if any, is to oneself and to one’s family and community. The Indian diaspora in Africa opt for the safer middle-class. This is revealed when Indians in Africa side with the Europeans and not with the natives in the Mau-Mau movement. While describing Tanzania’s independence the narrator mentions how their community was a mere spectator and did not participate in the nation building process. Their reaction to independence is described as follows:

What is this thing called independence? We woke up one morning, the green and black and gold flew instead of the red white and blue [...] Then there were of course the demagogues out to provoke reaction against the Asians. “The Asians are not integrating enough!” thundered one. “If you want to stay in Africa, you must learn to live with Africans...”

This flag; roared the commissioner, “it has the colours of Africa! This black and green and yellow flag – what does the black signify, eh jamani?” He held up his arm and pinched his black skin for all to see. “This. And the green is the beautiful land of Africa. Eh? And what is this yellow stripe in the middle? Eh?”
“The Indians! The Mhindis!” shouts an unknown voice. (198-99)

The migrants keep aloof from the happenings in the new nation because of the belief that they are superior. According to A.P. Mukherjee:

Vassanji has a remarkable capacity for creating a complex narrative pattern with seemingly simple details of day-to-day life. And yet, hidden in these same mundane details are tough questions about history, colonialism and the ambiguous role of Indians as a group whose dual role as the colonized and as collaborators makes it hard to portray their situation in the binary opposition of colonizer/colonized prevalent in postcolonial criticism. (167)

Each political development underlines the Asian Africans’ precarious hold on the continent, each time their status has to be negotiated again in relation to the white colonizer, the Arabs, the Swahili, the Africans from the interior. The sense of being that Vassanji portrays for all the characters comes from this theory of discrimination. Vassanji draws our attention not only to circumstances under which Asian Africans developed their interstitiality but also to the fact that they lost their identity every time the power structure changed. They now occupied an in-between space between the refined Africans and the native Africans. Regarding the peripheral position which the Asians faced, Homi K. Bhabha says:

The Post-colonial space is now “supplementary” to the metropolitan centre; it stands in a subaltern, adjunct relation that doesn’t aggrandize the presence of the west but redraws its frontiers in the menacing, antagonistic boundary of
cultural difference that never quite adds up, always less than one nation and double; from this splitting of time and narrative emerges a strange empowering knowledge for the migrant that is at once schizoid and subversive. (*Nation and Narration*, 318-19)

In foregrounding the process of eastern African colonies coming to nationhood the novel presents an interstitial passage as in the double-time of the nation. Major events and experiences of diasporic people are not included in the official and objective history. The novel shows how the policy of Africanisation is underpinned by an assimilationist ideology, since the purpose of nationalist pedagogical discourse is to create one homogeneous nation of the many different ethnic communities. As Rosemary Marangoly George points out:

> the novel examines the impact of Julius Nyerere’s Ujamma socialist project, and the status of Indians in this newly defined national ‘family’ and it demonstrates that while immigrants disturb the easy interpellation of national subjects by a hegemonic discourse the implementing of such a national project ‘threaten the immigrants’ project … of remaining marginal.’ (133)

With Julius Nyerere’s party winning the elections the natives realize their powers. Omari, the tailor who had worked at Kulsum’s shop demands his pay: “What I want, madam, is backpay for six years according to labour salaries” (153).

Kulsum, the narrator’s mother tries to safeguard her family from the experience of cultural hybridization. She is unable to reconcile with the
fact that her daughter Begum would marry a White man: “Over my dead body. Do you want to murder me. Take a knife, go on, take a knife, take these scissors, I’ll give you soul!” (236). When Sona decides to migrate to London, Kulsum tells him:

Don’t marry a white girl. Don’t smoke or drink. Don’t eat pork. Don’t turn your back on your faith and your community. Don’t forget your family. (235)

When Asians are ill-treated, their properties are nationalised. They are expected to leave the country. The rulers said “the Asians were sabotaging the economy, hoarding to create shortages, smuggling sugar, coffee and currency, not paying taxes… and they were not integrating, not allowing their daughters to marry Africans. Therefore [...] the Asians must go” (299). The Asians start migrating to USA and Canada. This is what uncle Goa’s family does when they migrate to London. Salim’s own sister marries a foreigner Mr. Harris and migrates to London. Sona, Salim’s younger brother also migrates to the U.S.A. to pursue his literary career.

The Shamis had waited for a saviour in India:

Shamas Pir had promised the Shamsis a saviour from the west, and they had waited for hundreds of years. Now it seemed to some that he had come, not a pir, but a Pierre, Trudeau of Canada, promising a cold Eldorado in the north. He will take us, they said, as he took the Ugandans, leave it to Pierre True-do! And they, who had renounced the Queen’s rule for a new future, abandoned hope and returned to her, still close but separated by an ocean. (305)
In The Gunnysack Sona and Hassan’s family all migrate to the U.S. because of better opportunities. In The Book of Secrets Ali and Rita also elope to London they also want better life.

Vassanji describes Tanzania’s independence once again in The Book of Secrets where he highlights how people were happy at the very thought of independence. As Pius mentions:

I had returned to a country on the brink of independence, one December that year, six months away, and the laid-back Dar I had known was bubbling with excitement. There was hope in the air, and a cherry confidence, symbolized in the promise of a torch of freedom to be mounted on the summit of Kilimanjaro for all to see, across the continent and beyond.

(273)

But later the Asians realize that independence actually shifted their position from the top to the bottom. Their properties were nationalised and they were ill-treated. Pius relates their plight:

We were intensely aware of our essential homelessness. Our world was diminishing with the Empire. We were all travellers who had on an impulse taken off, for all kinds of personal reasons [...] We were now aware that we would have to choose: to return home... but what was home now? To take on a new nationality... but what did that mean? To move on to the vestiges of the empire, to the last colonies and dominions, or perhaps to retreat to where it all began, London. (274)
Like *The Gunny Sack*, a lot of characters in *The Book of Secrets* also migrate to London as they find more opportunities and greater scope in London. In both the novels the Asians who stay back in Africa try their level best to prove themselves loyal Africans. This is reflected when Salim joins the National Service Camp at Uhuru Camp. Uhuru is situated at the border of the country. He goes to the camp carrying a big trunk like Dhanji Govindji who had also migrated to Africa carrying a big trunk. He describes the topography of this place: “How to explain the numbness, the loneliness, the total paralysis of memory, the glazing over the reality, at finding myself in the interior of Africa not knowing, not knowing what to expect” (147). The trunk which Salim brings represents the likes and prejudices which a migrant takes with him when he migrates to some other place. Salim says: “We Indians have barged into Africa with our big black trunk and every time it comes in our way” (250). A tie to his Shamsi community is reinforced when in the camp he goes to see the mukhi at Kaboya and forms association with them. At the camp Uhuru Salim meets his classmate Shivji who was addressed as ‘Shivji Shame’ by all the students. He had become an Afande in the National Service. Salim asks him why he chose this profession. He describes his plight and says that he came from a poor family where he was brought up by his grandmother. Boys used to beat him; then one day he retaliated and felt good. He says:

There is no thrill like power... I have tasted it, I am addicted to it! (265)

He joined National Service Camp as here he had an identity as an Afande, where people paid respect to him.
At the camp Salim also meets the radical Amina, after which the entire course of his life is changed. He is also involved in radical politics. Their first conversation is important where they claim their right on Africa.

"Why do you call me ‘Indian’? I too am an African. I was born here. My father was born here – even my grandfather!"

"And then? Beyond that what did they come to do, these ancestors of yours? Can you tell me? Perhaps you don’t know. Perhaps you conveniently forgot – they financed the slave trade!"

The past is imagined in a certain way for legitimating one’s cultural identity and to justify one’s claim to a place or one’s own home which is challenged by the others. The place where one resides becomes a site of competing for belongingness by migrant groups and the people who call themselves indigenous. According to Bhabha:

The exercise of power may be both more politically effective and psychically affective because their discursive liminality may produce greater scope for strategic manoeuvre and negotiation. (*Nation and Narration* 296, 97)

The interaction in which Salim and Amina engage demonstrates how in a diasporic space of conflicting subjectivities the past is deployed and counter-deployed for inscribing oneself in ‘home’ while excluding the ‘other’.

This theme is explored suggestively through Salim and Amina’s affair where Salim is fond of her and follows her ideologies, while Amina is a Marxist. Through their love affair the novel once again explores the theme of cultural hybridity and links Salim’s life with his great-
grandfather. But Salim soon realizes that their relationship is only possible in the forest, a place away from civilization:

To have met in the jungle and fallen in love there, among people we did not know, on the banks of a stream, under a tree, how easy it was. No sooner were we back in the city than we started carrying the burden of our races… (280)

The failure of the love relationship is located in the movement from the forest, a free site, to the city where interracial marriages were not accepted. Their relationship ends when Amina goes to the U.S.A. and Salim marries an Asian African girl who can speak Gujarati. This once again links the life of Salim and his great-grandfather Dhanji Govindji who had also left a native woman and had then married a girl of his own caste. Salim later flees from Africa to Canada because it is expected that he will be arrested due to his links with Amina. Salim says: “I think I ran away from the marriage, an impossible domestic situation… like my grandfather, Huseni… and even his father Dhanji Govindji who went to look for him” (325).

The lives of Salim, Huseni and Dhanji Govindji are interlinked as all of them escape their domestic situation. In the end the sack narrates the story of Ji Bai who went to Bajupur, her native place in India. Vassanji completes the narration from where it had begun as Dhanji Govindji had migrated to Africa from India.

Part II of The Book of Secrets is titled ‘The Father and the Son’ and has two epigraphs. The second is a line from a Gujarati hymn “My relations are this prison around me...” (epigraph). The epigraph suggests that for Ali, Mariamu and Pipa’s son, life is caught in the maze of his own
relations where he first lives with Khanoum, Mariamu’s sister, then comes to live with Pipa, then comes to know about Corbin, and then finally elopes to London with Rita. He adapts himself quite easily to the new ways of London. In London he marries for the third time. Amin Malak makes an important point about the symbolic resonances of Ali’s heritage:

Significantly, Ali’s mongrelized triple parentage, together with his subsequent triple marriages, symbolizes the three sources of cultural identity for the novel’s Indian Muslim community in East Africa (the Isma’ilis, fictionally referred to here as the Shamsis): Asia, through historical roots and religion, Africa, through settlement and trade; and Britain, through education and colonial affiliation. (176)

This section deals with Pius’s personal life, his teaching years his relationship with his students.

The history of a specific racial and socio-economic group finds expression in The Book of Secrets through the character of Pipa, who is a shopkeeper and articulates the various discourses of power, marginality, diaspora, migrancy and dispossession. He lived in Moshi and is regarded as an unfortunate child. He had an inauspicious growing up without a father and with a prostitute mother. Pipa’s major sin was to be born a native of racially alien ancestry in East Africa. He is denied his place and also disowned by the people. His is a quest for stability and security. He tries a lot of professions and moves to a number of places. Through this character Vassanji acquaints us with the War of Europe and also his personal struggle to live a life with dignity. Vassanji describes him as follows:
His given name was Nurmohamed. Pipa was the nickname given to the family by the neighbourhood, and it had struck. It made him feel a lack of respectability, of a place that was truly home. (127)

He first of all works as a porter in Moshi Pipa finds in the Shamsis at Tanga a community that he feels he belongs to:

Whether he was of the Shamsi community or not, Pipa could not say with certainty. But like many others before him, he accepted the Shamsis, and the rewards that followed: a job and a place to stay; eminent men to vouch for him; and, if he wanted, a bride. So he could become the camel who at last stopped his endless journey and found a home. (133)

He then starts working as a sweeper and then as a rickshaw puller. Later, in pursuit of an upward socio-economic mobility, Pipa moves to Dar-es-Salaam that has a greater promise of expansion and growth than Tanga. Pipa starts a business at Kikono. Vassanji gives the reader a portrait of an achiever, who is struggling to create a distance between himself and the poverty that he was raised in. Pipa feels compelled to run away from spaces that stand in the way of his desire for a homely life. He also worked as an agent in war for both Germans and Britishers. This uneasy state of Pipa is highlighted by Pius Fernandes, the narrator:

Pipa was home now, yet lived in fear. He was a marked man, both known to the agents of Maynard and to the allies of the Germans; any of them could call on him as they had done in Kikono. (200)
This instance of feeling at home and yet not at home that Pipa goes through during his interstitial experience of the First World War later becomes the hallmark of his state of being. However, in the end his daily work gives him satisfaction and he is totally engrossed in it. As Pius says:

His customers, as for the rest of his life, were the poorer Africans and Asians, those who could not stock their larders for more than a day - buying a little of this and a little of that. But bit by bit, as Pipa would say, the ocean gets filled. [...] A little bit of turmeric, chili, coriander, inside a flat cone of paper - fold, fold, fold, and a packet in the basket that would fetch an anna. It became a meditation for him, folding packets, an unconscious act during which he could think, come to himself, watch the world. (203)

Like Pipa, Pius had also migrated from India to Dar in search of his own place. He wanted an identity which would be carved by exploring new realms of knowledge. His quest is also for stability and a quest for identity. Pius recalls how he came to Dar:

We were sailing to freedom: freedom from an old country with ancient ways, from the tentacles of clinging families with numerous wants and myriad conventions; freedom even from ourselves grounded in those ancient ways. (239)

Pius recalls how he and his friends had migrated from India in the hope of making a new space for themselves were they would be free to live their lives according to their own wishes. They were not bound to follow a prescribed life style. Pius accepts to interpret the diary because he believes in his subject that is history and believes that history can trace truth. Like
Pipa who became rich but then died as a poor shopkeeper. Pius was also a reputed teacher in reputed school but now he lives on the mercy of his students.

Pipa and Pius are related in another way also, that is, they are both curious to know about Mariamu’s relationship with Corbin, but both fail to solve this riddle as the diary maintains its silence on this issue. Pius gives his own interpretation as to why Mariamu steals the diary:

Why? To steal back our secret – her shame – from the Englishman? To prove to her husband her innocence? [...] So was this her gift to him; one which she, one day, some evening in better times, would have shown had she lived?...

(172)

Amin Malak reads the supposed theft of the diary as an oppositional move when he writes:

this gesture on the part of the illiterate, silent subaltern represents a daring, subversive act that symbolically signifies a form of resistance retrieval, and appropriation of the tools of the dominant discourse whose codes are to be deciphered generation later. (177-78)

By not disclosing the identity of Ali’s father, Vassanji keeps this a secret. According to the mukhi the fact that Ali is born “fair and had grey eyes” (156) does not prove he is Corbin’s son. Mariamu remains silent on the issue, neither confirming nor rejecting Pipa’s allegation. Mariamu as Malak says is essentially beyond history, refusing the conventional boundaries that assume the past should stay in the past. Her presence continues to haunt the novel.
Pipa keeps the diary as he believed that:

The book contained the answer to his torment. What was the relationship, between the ADC and his Mariamu. Was the boy, Aku, really his own? He could not read it, yet he could take this gift with him wherever he went. It was from her and she must be in it, described in it. The book contained her spirit. (172)

A third character who is related to both Pipa and Pius is Alfred Corbin, the colonizer. He is the one who has written the diary. A diary which contains half truths and conceals facts both for Pipa as he is unable to understand English, and for Pius as the diary is not continuous and there exist gaps in the entries. Corbin’s life is also a quest for identity, for making a space of his own. Driven by this urge, Corbin leaves all the comforts of his native place and accepts the job of an administrator in Africa. He is linked with Pipa and Pius as Corbin’s relationship with Mariamu, Pipa’s wife, is the central question of the novel.

There exist two ways of interpreting native life. One is that of Corbin for whom the natives follow absurd rules and regulations, and indulge in a lot of superstitions. He does not understand their customs. Another view is that of Pius who understands the natives’ life style. One example of this is that when Corbin falls ill he believes that he is cured by some medicine but Pius believes in the fact that he is cured by “Maalim”. Pius visualizes Mariamu’s soul communicating to Pipa as he believes in souls. Corbin is not emotionally attached to Africa: for him it was just an ordinary experience, unlike Gregory, who is Pius’s colleague in school and an Englishman. Gregory does not want to leave Africa when African independence is declared and migrants are ill-treated. He has a sense of
belongingness in Dar and does not want to leave this place as for him Dar is his home. He writes a collection of poems ‘Havin of Peace’ in praise of Dar.

In the funeral rites of Pipa’s son, Gregory is “wearing a suit, wiping sweat from his face, also mouthing the Kalima along with the others” (280). Gregory’s chanting of Kalima is significant in that it is indicative of the emotional bondage which Gregory has for his fellow men with whom he lives in Dar. Gregory feels isolated and lonely. All these feelings are expressed in a poem titled as ‘Brown Man’:

He will endure
in sweet tan innocence
inert untouched
hardy transplant in the region’s new sun…
While I
pale and larva soft
wither
in African heat. (283)

This poem is dedicated to the Asians who lived in Dar and had some chance of assimilation whereas it expresses Gregory’s inability to assimilate. Pius believes that:

This city where I first landed forty years ago has so grown on me, it is like an extension of my self. I will never shed it. (316)

Part III of the novel is titled as ‘Gregory’ which has as its epigraph a poem by W.H. Auden:

Really, must you,
Over familiar
Dense companion,
Be there always?
The bond between us
Is chimerical surely:
Yet I cannot break it

The relationship between Pius and Gregory is a bond about which Pius himself does not know but it is actually through Gregory’s packet which he has kept for Pius that Corbin in a way contacts Pius, but the final question of Corbin’s relationship with Mariamu remains unsolved. In this section Pius describes his own life his experiences as a teacher, how he was fond of his student Rita; he also discusses his relationship with his colleague Gregory. The diary pulls both Rita and Gregory into the narrative where Rita is Pipa’s daughter-in-law, Akber Ali’s second wife who claims the diary, and Gregory is Corbin and his wife’s friend who exchanged letters with them. Gregory leaves the parcel of the letters for Pius which is given to him after Gregory’s death. With the intervention of these persons Pius wonders:

First Rita, then Gregory, they have entered my narrative, unasked, so to speak. I began a history, with an objective eye on the diary of Alfred Corbin, ADC, DC one of the architects of Indirect Rule, later Governor – and so on. I saw myself as a mere observer, properly distanced by time and relationship, solving a puzzle. Now strangely, I see myself drawn in, by a gravitational force, pulled into the story. (233)

When Pius scrutinizes Corbin’s letters, he discovers that once again Corbin has maintained his silence on the issue of Mariamu and his
relationship with her. He mentions about Mariamu as a girl who was victim of natives’ superstitious life style. He also mentions how he helped this girl and sent her to the Missionaries. In another letter Corbin mentions that he lost his diary and pen and then later the commissioner found his pen in Pipa’s shop when the commissioner raided the shop. Corbin was upset with this and thought that Pipa had stolen his diary. He mentions in one of the letters written to Gregory:

Your conjecture that Pipa is just the kind of shopkeeper who would hoard a diary is somewhat disturbing. I had hoped that it was dead and buried. The idea of it lying hidden in an Indian duka is revolting. (323)

Corbin does not want that Pipa should keep the diary as the mukhi, head of the community had told Corbin that Pipa suspected that Corbin and Mariamu had a relationship.

Pius acquaints us with his own story that his own life is not fully known to him. He cannot infer judgments about his own self. When Rita accuses him of being homosexual he maintains silence, as to this question he himself has no answer. Pius’s relationship with Gregory is mysterious. Pius remembers when once he went to Gregory’s house:

Of that moment I remember a feeling of dislocation, a sense of empathy; a feeling of being utterly alone, with another human being in my arms. (310)

The ending of both the novels is more or less similar where Vassanji puts the past to rest for a better and promising future. The last chapter of The Gunny Sack is titled ‘And the Final Night’ as here Salim will put the past to rest as he had seen the past in full detail and is now acquainted with
all the details about which he had been totally ignorant. He addresses memory as follows:

Memory, Ji Bai said, is this gunny sack.

I can put it all back and shake it and churn it and sift it and start again, re-order memory, draw a new set of lines through those blots, except that each of them is like a black hole, a doorway to a universe. It can last for ever, this game, the past has no end – but no, Shehrbanoo, you will not snare me like that, let it end today, this your last night. (326)

Salim says that the past is an endless territory which can begin and continue its journey through a different course and can narrate the stories once again. He decides that he will go back to his wife and daughter Amina. He thinks of his daughter and says:

The running must stop now, Amina. The cycle of escape and rebirth, uprooting and regeneration, must cease in me. Let this be the last runaway, returned, with one last, quixotic dream. Yes, perhaps here lies redemption, a faith in the future, even if it means for now to embrace the banal present, to pick up the pieces of our wounded selves, our wounded dreams, and pretend they’re still there intact, without splints, because from our wounded selves flowers still grow. (330)

Salim talks of return which symbolizes a return to home where new and stable identities will be formed. He is tired by feelings of unhomeliness and impossibility of belonging. The basement of Toronto is in reality a vantage point from where Salim makes assessment about his
ancestors and about his own life. His plight is that of a being who wants to belong to a place which denies him that security. As Bhabha asserts:

The recesses of the domestic space become sites for histories’ most intricate invasions. In that displacement, the borders between home and the world, become confused, and uncannily, the private and the public become part of each other, forcing upon us a vision that is divided and disorienting. (*The Location of Culture* 9)

East Africa, for the migrants, is one such place that they want to forget but are unable to do. The novel portrays the ‘interstitiality’ of such characters. Vassanji feels the burden of history and this burden is once again emphasized in *The Book of Secrets* where the protagonist in the end faces a dilemma, whether to remember the past or to forget it. Rita who is Pipa’s daughter-in-law, asks Pius to give the diary to her as she fears the details of the diary can tarnish the name of her family. She accuses Pius that some of the questions of his own life are not decipherable to him; she says:

There are questions that have no answer; we can never know the innermost secrets of any heart. Each dot is infinity, Pius your history is surface. (297)

For Rita each dot is infinity as each and every person has his own way of interpretation. She says: “Of course the past matters, that’s why we need to bury it. Sometimes we have to forget to be able to start again” (298). Rita willingly accepts that task of burying the past:

Let it lie, this past. The diary and the stories that surround it are now mine, to bury. (298)
The novel ends with a similar note to that of *The Gunny Sack* when Pius finally decides to put the past to rest. He comes to see his own memories as another book of secrets:

A book as incomplete as the old one was, incomplete as any book must be. A book of half lives, partial truths, conjecture, interpretation and perhaps even some mistakes. What better homage to the past than to acknowledge thus, rescue it and recreate it, without presumption of judgment, and as honestly, though perhaps as incompletely as we know ourselves, as part of the life of which we all are a part? (331-32)

*The Book of Secrets* in a way accepts a failure of historical endeavour as the central question of the novel remains unsolved. As De Certeau suggests, there will always be, in historiographical endeavour, that ‘unknown immensity’ — the body, the actual, the real — that seduces and menaces our knowledge. The novel tries to include what is not said as part of what is said. As Vassanji himself states, “the mystery of the novel mimics the mystery of everyday life” (Interview qtd in Shane Rhodes 112), or as Michael Foucault mentions:

There is no binary division to be made between what one says and what one does not say; we must try to determine the different ways of not saying such things… There is not one but many silences, and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourse. (qtd in Rhodes 12)

Foucault stresses the importance of what we do not know in what we do know and according to him there exist no divisions, no firm frontiers
between them, rather they are both signifying parts of the same singular discourse. At times it becomes necessary to bury something in order to make a new beginning.

The novel ends with Pius accepting an offer as a part-time teacher in Dar. He gives the diary to Rita, Pipa’s daughter-in-law and promises that he will never disclose their family history to anyone. In the epilogue of the novel Pius decides:

> What I can never disclose, give to the world, is mine only in trust. The constant reminding presence of a world which I created, a history without the relief of an outlet, can only serve to oppress. And so I have decided to relinquish it. Only then I can begin to look towards the rest of my life and do the best with the new opportunity that has come my way. (331)

This new opportunity is once again to teach students. If in *The Gunny Sack* Salim dreams of a secure future in terms of the Asian Africans’ acceptance as Africans, in *The Book of Secrets* Pius is happy to accept his new job where he will teach a new generation of children who are all hybrids and this experience, he hope will change his outlook towards life.

Thus in *The Gunny Sack* and *The Book of Secrets* Vassanji shows the identity crisis of first generation and second generation migrants in Africa, who in spite of their ill-treatment by Africans stay in Africa. In his third novel *No New Land* analysed in the next chapter, Vassanji shows the plight of immigrants who migrate from Africa to Canada in search of better life conditions.
References


