Chapter Three

Versions of History:

_The Gunny Sack and The Book of Secrets_

History drifts about in sands, and only the fanatically dedicated see it and recreate it, however incomplete their visions and fragile their constructs.

M. G. Vassanji, _The Book of Secrets_

One has to reckon with the fact that centuries of European imperialism and colonialism have brought about great transformations in our culture, history and outlook. Until the withdrawal of colonial rule, the colonized seemed to believe that they were always objects of someone else’s history. In Edward Said’s words: “The history that the settler writes is not the history of the country which he plundered, but the history of his own nation in regard to all that she skins off, all that she violates and starves” (Said, _Culture_ 327). Eurocentric master discourses have always projected Europe’s Other in a series of negations. Postcolonialism’s main concern, in a purely literary sense, lies in offering a textual resistance to such representations by subverting the master narratives of history and centring the marginal histories that have so long been subjugated or simply ignored. Those at the margins are now rewriting histories that have for so long been written by the West.
The history of colonization is necessarily followed by a struggle for independence and decolonization. But the irony of the situation is that the people of the ex-colonies, almost without exception have been unable to liberate themselves totally from the clutches of Western domination. Decolonization has often been limited to a change in sovereignty. There has indeed been a substitute of one political authority for the other. But all manner of economic bonds have survived to the benefit of the mother countries and of the new local middle classes of the newly independent countries. Besides, mass migration or the flow of human beings has been ever on the increase, especially in the last two decades. In this way old ties have been perpetuated, though in altered forms. At the same time, since the 1960s, the evolution of the global economy has culminated in an interweaving and integration of national economies to such an extent that some of the formerly colonized countries find themselves in a situation of dependence or poverty worse than they had earlier experienced. The former imperialists are no longer interested in controlling former colonies “from inside” but are very much interested in “‘helping’ them to develop, and to replacing a visible presence by the invisible government of the big banks: the International Monetary Fund, World Bank, and so on” (Ferro 349).

Colonization, which was a standardizing enterprise, had subverted the nature of other cultures. A veil of opacity is cast over the Other. The colonized people are cut off from their history; they lose their heritage
and are constrained to seek the reconstruction of their identity in terms of the model imposed upon them by their ruler. Theorists like Frantz Fanon have often remarked that imperialism and colonialism brought complete disorder to colonized peoples, disconnecting them from their histories, their landscapes, their languages, their social relations and their own ways of thinking, feeling and interacting with the world. The writing of counter histories thus plays a crucial role in spreading counter-information regarding the once subjugated peoples. It is said that for a long time, oral tradition and later the cinema have been the most effective means of broadcasting this counter-information. Mark Ferro, in his work *Colonization: A Global History*, remarks: "... each society produces its own counter-history in contra-diction to the standardization of historical knowledge" (356-7).

History, as Bill Ashcroft defines it in *Post-Colonial Transformation*, reads thus:

History is derived from the Greek word “historia” meaning “to investigate” and on the face of this historical investigation asks the most natural, the most innocent of questions—“what happened?” . . . perhaps most non-Western societies do not ask this question, simply because “what happened” is inseparable from what is still happening and will happen. (82)
Historiography has been regarded as one of the most far-reaching and influential imperial constructions of subjectivity. In response to the power of this discourse, postcolonial writers have interpolated the narrativity of history by disrupting and blurring the boundaries that would serve to separate it from literature. Coming to its veracity, history is not the synonym for truth. History is a representation and whether there can be a true representation of anything is debatable. In Edward Said's words, "... we must be prepared to accept the fact that a representation is *eo ipso* implicated, intertwined, embedded, interwoven with a great many other things besides the 'truth' which is itself a representation" (Said, *Orientalism* 272).

Eurocentric discourses projected distorted notions about the indigenes often stating that "... they were not fully human, they were not civilized enough to have systems, they were not literate, their languages and modes of thought were inadequate" (Memmi 83). The negation of indigenous views of history as "primitive" and "incorrect" forms a part of asserting colonial ideology. Indigenous people have criticized the way history is told from the perspective of the colonizers. At the same time, they have accepted that history is important for understanding the present and that reclaiming history is an essential part of decolonization. Indigenous peoples, with a view to "rewriting" and "rerighting" their position in history, have come forward with the desire to tell their own stories, write their own versions of history, in their own ways and to serve
their own purposes. Grand narratives of nation and empire have been rigorously contested in contemporary writing. In his work, *The Location of Culture*, Homi K. Bhabha expresses the opinion that what we have seen in recent times is the displacement of authoritarian histories rooted in the assumptions of imperialism, and in their place the eruption of "... a range of other dissonant, even dissident histories and voices—women, the colonized, minority groups, the bearers of policed sexualities" (5).

A large body of political writing and anti-colonial discourses has come up in reaction against the continuing impact of imperialism on people with a history of colonization. This kind of an approach to imperialism has culminated in the emergence of terms like "postcolonial discourse," "the empire writes back," and "writing from the margins." Linda Tuhiwai Smith, in her article "Imperialism, History, Writing, and Theory," considers these concepts as the ways in which the ideas of the indigenous peoples are articulated: "They are words of emotion which draw attention to the thousands of ways in which indigenous languages, knowledges and cultures have been silenced or misrepresented, ridiculed or condemned in academic and popular discourses" (95).

History is seen as a reflection of power. It confirms the supremacy of the modern, advanced, civilized West over the pre-modern, primitive, colonized societies and the way in which they use their power to dominate the Other. History privileges and legitimates the West that is deemed the initiator and possessor of modernity. It serves as a prominent
instrument for the control of subject peoples. The close link between history and power and the moral outworking of such power in the civilizing mission of the West can rightly be discerned in J. R. Seeley’s remark that in the eighteenth century, “the history of England is not in England, but in America and Asia” (Seeley, qtd. in Ashcroft 84). Hegel who is regarded as the founding father of history believed that only the fully human subject is capable of creating his own history. So Europe’s “Other” who is considered to be incapable of self-actualisation and who is branded as prehistoric cannot create his own history. The idea that history is patriarchal also stems from the notion that women are incapable of attaining the higher order of development. The postcolonial task is to contest the message of history that has relegated the postcolonial world to the margins and also to re-inscribe and subvert the unquestioned status of Eurocentric historiography. Postcolonial writers indulge in revising official history and rewriting it from the point of view of the victims or the losers. In such writings, public history and private stories go along together. From the postcolonial perspective, “History [with a capital H] ends where the histories of those peoples once reputed to be without history come together” (Glissant, qtd. in Ashcroft 98). To have a history is to have a legitimate existence. The embedding of micro-histories in the matrix of the master narratives of history, transform them. The transformation of history seems to stand as one of the most strategic and powerfully effective modes of cultural resistance.
There are different ways in which the colonized can respond to the imperial function of history—“they may acquiesce with its historical narratives; they may reject history outright; they may interject a different perspective into the discipline of history; or they may interpolate history in a way which reveals its assumptions and limitations” (Ashcroft 100-1). A specifically postcolonial response to history is interjection, in which the basic premises of historical narrative are accepted, but a contrary narrative, which claims to offer a more immediate or “truer” picture of postcolonial life, a record of which has been omitted from imperial history, is inserted into the historical record. William Luis’s remark best sums up the idea of interjection:

The native history of America begins with the struggle to subvert Western man’s powers, that is, with the attempt to rewrite his writing of history . . . . By subverting writing, the oppressed usurps the power of language and, consequently history, to uncover a different version of the sense of history. (Luis, qtd. in Ashcroft 102)

Interpolating is not mere re-writing by inserting the marginal histories that have been excluded from the master discourse, but “writing back.” Thus interpolation of historical discourse becomes a key strategy in the transformation of history.

Literature and history are thought to be complementary subjects or disciplines. Literature suggests imagination, fiction, sensibility or feeling.
History, on the other hand, suggests objective, scientific investigation. While historical events are believed to be observable, literary events are invented. The American literary historian Hayden White has broken with disciplinary conventions and applied the elements of literary theory to historical texts. He is of the opinion that what distinguishes the literary from the historical is not fiction versus fact, but different textual properties. Laurence Lerner, in his book *The Frontiers of Literature* states that like a literary narrative, history is also a narrative as it is a “blend of observation, memory and imagination” (12). He also throws light on the fact that both history and literature are interested in power. While the novelist is interested in how power is sought and exercised by individuals, the interest of the historian lies in studying the operation of power by groups. Yet another feature they have in common is that the historian and the novelist also share the narrative space of textuality. This happens because “history and story: etymologically the two words are the same, and only in English have they separated in this way” (Lerner 12). Lerner further observes that in French, German and Italian, history still retains an element of fiction in it. History, till recently, believed in the invincibility of facts, which were supposed to be sacred. It no longer remains a monolithic collection of facts and their hegemonic interpretations. E. H. Carr in *What is History*, challenging the notion of the fixity of facts, defined history as “a continuous process of interaction between the
As the "presencing" of the past and exploring the mechanisms of repression and subjugation seem to be some of the major concerns of New Historicism, an analysis of a literary text, especially one that is based on history, may seem to be incomplete without alluding to it. New Historicism is specifically concerned with questions of power and culture. As a postcolonial development, it proposes a new or alternative history to the conventional, established accounts and practices through which the literary texts had been largely studied. This is achieved by turning away from an apparently stable, fixed history which formed a kind of backdrop to the imaginative workings of the artist's mind to a past which was uneven, fragmented, even unfinished so that history becomes a site of an ongoing conflict.

Foucault is said to be the precursor of New Historicism. Jago Morrison, in the introduction to his work *Contemporary Fiction* remarks that, in literary studies, Foucauldian methods of analysis have proved to be the most influential of the past three decades. They form one of the key co-ordinates of New Historicism: "For Foucault, traditional history systematically works to suppress evidence of discontinuities, disjunctions and struggles between rival regimes of knowledge, because its overriding goal is to portray the present as a product of a clear and rational development" (Morrison 19). Foucault's works reflect a constant interest
in foregrounding the marginal, the silenced and the unacceptable. His works focus upon the intricately structured power relations in a given culture at a given time to demonstrate how that society controls its members through constructing and defining what appears to be "universal" or "natural truths." Each system produces its own version of truth. Since the truths of history are reflections of power and as power-relations keep on transforming, "whatever exists, having somehow come into being, is again and again interpreted to new ends, taken over, transformed, and redirected by some power superior to it" (McGowan, qtd. in Morrison 16-7). So history is being made and remade and is subject to fresh interpretations. Poststructuralists accept history only as a contemporary activity of narrating or representing the past.

New Historicism emerged in the 1980s as a reaction against earlier schools of criticism, especially Formalism, Structuralism and Deconstruction. It offers a new way of looking at texts and aims at "rehistoricizing" texts. Stephen Greenblatt coined the term "New Historicism" in 1982 to describe his method of interpretation of Renaissance texts. He sees it more as a textual practice than as a theory or doctrine of literary criticism. Greenblatt's anecdotal approach and his fascination with history and the minute details of culture soon attracted scholars working in other historical periods, leading to the increasing popularity of culturally and historically oriented studies. This general trend is often referred to as cultural studies. The American new
historicists and their British counterparts, cultural materialists, alike reject the Western tendency to write history from top downwards and in grand narrative strokes. Cultural materialists owe much to a tradition of Marxist analysis towards which their American colleagues seem to be hostile or indifferent.

Jeremy Hawthorn, in the work *Cunning Passages: New Historicism, Cultural Materialism and Marxism in the Contemporary Literary Debate*, discusses the significant role played by narratology in the development of New Historicism, an idea that has helped to undermine the assumption that the academic disciplines of history and literary criticism are fundamentally distinct in terms of their methodologies. Both historians and novelists (and literary critics) tell stories and the way in which they tell stories, has proved that the narratives of the historian have many things in common with those of the novelist (36). This awareness of the integral link between history and fiction has forced literary critics to look afresh at “the historicity of texts” and “the textuality of history”, as the American critic Louis Montrose has expressed it.

Some of the basic assumptions of New Historicism, according to Peter Barry, are that a New Historicist reading of a text looks at the historical document as a co-text rather than as context; new historicists juxtapose literary and non-literary texts, reading the former in the light of
the latter; they “defamiliarize” and “detach” a canonical text from any previous interpretation of it and looks at it as something new. It is:

A method based on a parallel reading of literary and non-literary texts, usually of the same historical period . . . . Instead of a literary “foreground” and a historical “background” it envisages and practises a mode of study in which literary and non-literary texts are given equal weight and constantly inform or interrogate each other. (Barry 172)

It is the practice of giving “equal weighting” to literary and non-literary material that marks the first major difference between the “new” and “old” historicism. In the place of dealing with a text in isolation from its historical context, new historicists attend primarily to the historical and cultural conditions of its production, and also of its later critical interpretations. A text, whether literary or historical, is a discourse which is the ideological product and cultural construct of a particular era.

The post-Second World War period has been one of repeated sea changes across the Anglophone world. The Anglophone writings in the contemporary period especially those produced in Africa, Asia and the Caribbean formerly colonized by Britain, reflect the transitions in the cultures and identities. Language is intimately imbricated in these transitions. Mass migrations of peoples across the globe, the extreme cultural interfusion and acceleration of economic globalization have complicated previous conceptions of ethnic and national identity. We now
have overlapping territories and intertwined histories, so that maintaining any form of local or individual identity becomes difficult. The formerly colonized nations are now trying to assert themselves on the global literary scene by producing a complex and heterogeneous variety of literatures that demand a similar variation in critical approach for analysing texts.

Family histories are providing new information in the form of recorded memories and are actively changing public understanding of the nature of the genre of national history. They pose an ongoing and cumulative challenge to the authority of established forms of macro-history. In the article, “Little Histories: Diasporan Family Narratives in Australia,” Longley remarks: “Family history is only one of the many related small-scale or alternative histories . . . biographies of people who have no special claim to fame . . . (264). These minor histories can be pictured as points along the line of traditional major history. Quite often, in stories or family histories, the personal recollection of events is seamlessly blended with pure fiction. Micro-histories are leading to the crumbling down of the wall between history and fiction. Some of the major theorists who have provided insights into the wearing down of the distinction between fiction and the “grand narratives” of history are Robert Young, Hayden White, Mary Louis Pratt, Donna Haraway, Foucault, Abdul Ian Mohammed, Deleuze and Guattari.
Reclaiming the past and eroding the colonialist ideology by which the past has been devalued seem to be concerns common to postcolonial writing and immigrant writing as well. According to Rosemary Marangoli George, "the immigrant genre, like the social phenomenon from which it takes its name, is born of a history of global colonialism and is therefore an undeniable part of postcolonialism and of decolonizing discourses" (George 278). The Third World immigrant in the Euro-American world sees himself as the Other. "His marginality itself is the result of his race, region and history. And he writes with this realisation in his bones" (Kirpal 5). Remaining on the fringes of cultures, the immigrant writer tries to reclaim all that he has left behind in the homeland.

Immigrant writers are compelled to write about their experiences in life and rewrite their histories which do not find a place in the white master discourses. Immigrant family histories are very often about pre-emigration memories of another place and another time, and are therefore distanced from the master narratives of history. The diasporic writer is able to express through micro-history, another possible community and to forge the means for another consciousness. Apart from exposing the crumbling façade of the monumental history against which they play their part, micro-histories also help us in understanding all the discontinuities that cross us, in history. It is within this perspective of mapping discontinuities for depicting the lives and experiences of ordinary peoples that M. G. Vassanji’s family sagas should be read. In his interview with
John Clement Ball, Vassanji comments on the purpose of writing these communal histories thus:

... it deals with subjects that have never been dealt with before: communal histories, histories which were considered sacred to some people ... it’s so personal, it’s so communal, it’s so private that you have to break new ground, and you have to worry about repercussions. (201)

History seems to be a common strand running through all of Vassanji’s works. In his interview with Kanaganayakam, Vassanji says:

“... the stories I tell always begin somewhere else. Just like myself .... My characters don’t mean anything until they have a history” (Kanaganayakam, “Substrata” 24). Retrieval of history becomes necessary because man’s primal emotions are always associated with community faiths, remembered pasts, bequeathed memories and oral testimonies. In his interview with Susheila Nasta, Vassanji remarks:

I think all people should have a sense of themselves, a sense of where they come from, and it just happens that people in East Africa—I think Indians as well as Africans and especially in Tanzania—don’t have that sense, a historical sense, of where they come from. (70)

Vassanji seems to take up the moral responsibility of giving his people an idea of who they are and where they come from. His major concern is to see how migration affects the lives and identities of his characters, an
issue that is personal to the author as well. *The Gunny Sack* “is centrally concerned with the experience of the African Asian diaspora in East Africa and explores the relationship between memory and the writing of histories amidst transient communities whose identities are mixed and shifting” (Nasta 69).

Preoccupation with the past is a recurring theme in Vassanji’s works. His second novel *No New Land* (1991) seems to begin where *The Gunny Sack* ends. In *No New Land*, Vassanji depicts the agony of transplantation to Canada, experienced by an Indian immigrant family from the already diasporic situation in East Africa. This phase of migration, prompted by racial conflicts between the native Africans and the African Asians, takes them to the white man’s land where they find themselves pushed to the periphery and marginalized as South Asians. Like its predecessor, *No New Land* is permeated by a sharp sense of history as reflected in the crucial statement with which the first chapter ends: “We are but creatures of our origins, and however stalwartly we march forward paving new roads, seeking new worlds, the ghosts from our pasts stand not far behind and are not easily shaken off” (*NNL* 9). *Uhuru Street* gives the chronological history of East Africa through four decades and the changes that take place in the people who live along the street as the nation passes from the collapse of colonialism to the securing of independence.
That the past always haunts the present and the future is again subjected to re-examination in Vassanji's third, fourth and fifth novels—*The Book of Secrets*, *AMRiiKA*, which has its settings in the US and *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall*. Ramji, the protagonist narrator of *AMRiiKA*, likes to indulge in origins—if not a real then a constructed one. Vassanji captures, through his spokesman Ramji, the history of migration of his fictional Shamsis in a very crafty manner:

I try to imagine some starting point in the past when that destiny began, that movement to reach out for a larger world. The furthest back I can go is to a medieval time, a tumultuous epoch in which I see a mystic mendicant who left a Persia ravaged by the Mongol Khans and sought refuge in the rich and chaotic soil of Hindustan—a larger India, today's South Asia—and found the people of my race and whispered to them of better worlds. (*AMR* 1-2)

Plunging into the past is something which Vassanji relishes. We thus come to know of the protagonist Ramji's grandma who was a singer and a healer, about his ancestors who were first Hindus and, later "converted to a sect of Islam" (*AMR* 3) and of their unending wait for the final avatar of their God Vishnu. "In Grandma's words, the Sun would arise that day from the West" (3). There is a big leap in time when Ramji gives us the history of migration of the Shamsis at the very next moment. "My people first sought it in Africa an ocean away, where they settled more than a
hundred years ago. But in time this west moved further and became—America; or, as Grandma said it: Amriika” (3). After Ramji’s departure for America, the narrative focuses on this “fucking fascist country” (8), as Ramji’s roommate Russel describes it. In *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall*, which abounds in history, the protagonist narrator tells us about his own evolution in a world of bribery and corruption that spans forty-seven years of history.

Vassanji is seen constructing history in all his novels. Talking about the construction of history the writer says:

> History is a play between . . . different objects; the created and the creating, the real and the imagined. In another sense, the narrator and the historian both play a kind of game with history; the idea of the book as a game, a play between things, is very important for me. The act of writing becomes a gamesmanship. (Rhodes 108)

*The Gunny Sack* and *The Book of Secrets*, the two novels chosen for detailed analysis in this chapter, throw powerful insights into the way in which the experiences of the marginalized are centre-staged in counter-histories, giving voice to the unheard. In his interview with Shane Rhodes Vassanji says that the two novels are just “one construction of history” (108). In the former, Vassanji uses something amorphous—a gunny sack, a metaphor for the collective memory of his community—as the starting point for the construction of history. It contains numerous artifacts, each
serving as a memory aid. In the latter, the tool for constructing history is something more concrete—a diary which belongs to a British colonial officer. “The device of Corbin’s diary proposes a different, more defined relationship between history, story and the individual than Vassanji’s previous emphasis on seemingly unrelated contents of the gunny sack” (Dyer 19).

*The Gunny Sack* offers a historical narrative of cross-continental immigration from India to East Africa to North America over the course of four generations of the Govindji family. Here “Vassanji is telling the story of his people, the African Asians who, like *trisanku*, are suspended between worlds that they acknowledge as theirs but which do not accept them as theirs” (Salat, in Begum & Dutt 72). He tries to unearth the communal and cultural past of his people, and along with it, a sense of the “self” that has been distorted by the processes of colonization, migration and transplantation on alien lands. In order to recover their lost “selves” and “voices,” Vassanji opens the gunny sack full of memories of a hundred years for his people to re-live. The time span covered is one hundred years—right from the beginning of the Indian settlement on the coast of East Africa which is under the Germans and then changes hands and passes on to the British and finally to independence when the condition of the Indians turns out to be precarious, forcing them to withdraw from East Africa. It starts with Dhanji Govindji’s arrival in Zanzibar in 1885, and extends up to his great grandson Salim Juma’s
departure to the United States in the mid-1970s. The opening event, set in the 1970s in an unnamed city in North America, is the sophisticated funeral of Ji Bai the daughter-in-law of Dhanji. It is a funeral arranged by the “Westernised funeral committee” (GS 27), though she might not even have dreamt of dying in a foreign land. Here Vassanji departs from the conventional models set by nineteenth-century English novels, for the narrative does not begin from the beginning, but from the end, with Ji Bai’s funeral. This event serves to juxtapose the “here” and the “there,” and the “now” and the “then,” as it helps in drawing a contrast between a Westernised funeral and a culturally different funeral. She dies on her way to meet her grand nephew Salim Juma, also named “Kala” by virtue of the colour of his skin. Her travelling companion Aziz, Ji Bai’s grandnephew by Dhanji’s Indian line of ancestry through Fatima, entrusts the gunny sack with Salim. Salim’s story begins with Ji Bai’s death which marks the end of a whole way of life. “Ji Bai’s mind, the museum of memory, is lost when she passes from this world into another” (Bucknor 17).

The gunny sack, which is a repository of the collective memory of the Shamsis, is the prototype of the humble traveller’s suitcase. It “holds” the history and experiences of common people who have no special claim to fame. Although Salim Juma, by his mixed ancestry, is not the legitimate heir, ultimately the gunny sack passes into his hands. Salim being “one-eighth” African, Vassanji makes him the protagonist-narrator
of the novel, for he feels that only a person of Salim’s ancestry can narrate the experience of the African Asians. Salim names the gunny sack Shehrebanoo after Shehrazade, seemingly placing it, in the literary ancestry of the Arabian Nights. The artifacts in the old gunny bring to Salim, who is confined to the basement apartment in the Western metropolis, memories of a wandering life as trading immigrant peoples. The gunny sack is a Pandora’s Box, and each image “a clue to a story, a person, a world” (6). It contains an infinite number of stories, chronicling the private and communal histories of four generations of an Indian family that immigrated to East Africa. Salim, the narrator interfaces his “recalls” with the sack’s stories about the family’s and community’s collective histories, not all of which are pleasant or dignified, thereby casting the narrator’s lot with the fate of his ethnic group. Says Amin Malak:

This strategy represents one of the common features of Third World/postcolonial narratives, whereby characterization signifies not an exercise of isolation but a deliberate endeavour at contextualizing an individual’s destiny with that of a family’s, community’s, or a nation’s. (“Ambivalent Affiliations” 277)

Vassanji seems to accord to the theme of rewriting and rerighting history in the very choice of the gunny sack as the protagonist of the novel and not any human being. The gunny sack contains:
some knick-knack of yester year: a bead necklace shorn of its polish; a rolled up torn photograph; a cowrie shell; a brass incense holder, a Swahili cap so softened by age that it folded neatly into a square; a broken rosary tied up crudely to save the remaining beads, a bloodstained muslin shirt; a little book. There were three books in that old gunny that never left her bedside. (GS 3)

Each of these seemingly insignificant items triggers a memory. The bloodstained shirt, for instance, reminds Salim of a murder in the family. The diaries which reveal so much of the past, with the help of interpretation, are important in unravelling the mystery of Dhanji Govindji’s death. These are the most important artifacts in the gunny, though the others are integral to the humble lives of the Shamsis. The cover illustration of The Gunny Sack shows items which are part of the Shamsi community life: the cowrie shells representing the African connection, pestle and mortar used in every day Indian cooking, an embroidered shirt typically worn by Gujaratis, a rosary emblematic of the Muslim-Hindu religious origins of the group being delineated, a map of Africa and a suitcase symbolic of emigration-immigration (Parameswaran 195-96). Together these artifacts throw light on the group experiences of the Shamsis.

Memory has no limits or a linear order. The “clip clop” of footsteps that Salim hears outside the basement apartment reminds him of
his teacher Miss Penny, later Mrs. Gaunt. Her words, “Where do you come from . . . ? Begin at the beginning” (6), are words that reverberate in his mind. It is his teacher who first asks him about his origins. And every time he thinks of her, he begins to search for the beginning—those bygone days when the village of Junapur in India was converted into an esoteric sect “that considered thundering Allah as simply a form of reposing Vishnu” (7). In his interview with Shane Rhodes Vassanji says: “Our people were converted between two and five hundred years ago from sects which worshipped the god Vishnu, yet Vishnu was still an important part of the religious atmosphere I was brought up in” (116), thereby projecting the Hindu Islamic roots of his Shamsis.

The narrator takes us along the “crazy dance of history” (GS 10) when he traces the circumstances leading to the disintegration of the Shamsis, culminating in their transplantation to East Africa. The conversion from Hinduism to Islam that took place three centuries ago resulted in religious conflicts in the community. The Saviour, as promised by Shamas pir, the founder of the community, failed to come; so too, the rains for two consecutive years. The community that was both Hindu and Muslim broke up in confusion. Thus from Junapur through the harbour town of Porbander, to Zanzibar Vassanji traces Dhanji Govindji’s journey within and across national boundaries, a journey motif that is integral to his writing, as is true of diasporic writing in general. The author imagines one of his ancestors as having migrated from Gujarat in India to East
Africa around the time Dhanji begins his journey along the same route. It takes Dhanji two months to reach Zanzibar, the jewel of Africa. Vassanji now points out a reality that has been neglected in the pages of history. Zanzibar was a place where Indians had lived and traded for centuries even before European colonization. By chronicling the history of the Shamsis / Ismailis, Vassanji brings to light a forgotten chapter in Indian history, often ignored by the Indian Indians and the African Indians. A year after his arrival in Zanzibar, Dhanji reaches Bagamoyo from where he joins a small caravan going southwards to the slave route and finally reaches the village of Matamu.

Through the border crossings of his fictional Shamsis, Vassanji tries to link this esoteric, predominantly Muslim sect with the Shamsis scattered across the world. Vassanji seems to give the impression that they have a worldwide network that serves as a support system to new immigrants. Thus the protagonist-narrator says that wherever there are a few Shamsis, there is a mukhi or religious head. There are mukhis in London, in Singapore, and in Toronto. “There is still a mukhi in Matamu, but there is no longer a mukhi in Junapur . . .” (10), a statement that focuses on the almost total uprooting of the Shamsis from their land of origin. Ragavji Devaraj who is the mukhi of Matamu helps Dhanji put up a dukan in that village. He also gives him a servant, Bibi Taratibu who is a slave discarded on the slave route from Kilwa. She cooks for him, takes care of him and even keeps him warm when the nights turn cold. The
result is Huseni, Dhanji’s half-Indian, half-African son. Kala the protagonist narrator belongs to the slave woman’s line of ancestry. Vassanji makes his narrator wonder whether the world would have been different if the trend of inter-racial marriage continued: “Tell me, Shehrbanoo, would the world be different . . . 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 . . .” (11). But the community raises a furore in Junapur and the other cities of Cutch, Kathiawad and Gujarat. Frantic efforts are made to retain the purity of the race and missionaries are dispatched to tackle the Issue.

That history repeats itself, at times in contradictory form, is proved by the Salim-Amina relationship described in the final section of the book. It is a re-enactment of the Dhanji-Taratibu affair. If it is Dhanji who discards Taratibu, there is a reversal of history when it comes to the Salim-Amina relationship. Taratibu is pushed to the margins when Dhanji marries Fatima, the Zanzibari widow’s daughter. The exploitation of the African women by the Indians, already branded as an exploiter class, is clearly brought out here. Taratibu is forced to retreat to the farthest boundary of the forest, into the African segment of the village. Being a muted, subjugated woman, Taratibu leaves never to return. But Salim’s African girlfriend Amina is bold enough to voice her protest against the racial discrimination practised against them by the dukawallahs (the
Brown middlemen) and the Europeans alike. She says: “Do you know what it was like to be an African in colonial times, Indian? It was to be told that no matter what you achieved, you were ultimately a servant . . .” (211). Amina deserts Salim and goes to New York only to return with a white American. In both cases the burden of the races foils the relationships. Though a character (Nuru Poni) in *The Gunny Sack* says: “. . . when people of two races combine, beautiful children are born with the virtues of both races and the prejudices of neither, one must hope” (185), it was not yet time then for inter-racial marriages as they were considered taboo.

Taratibu's son Huseni grows up to hate his father. His “single-minded purpose in life is a relentless enmity toward his father, whose every move he tries to thwart, every rise in esteem he tries to bring down” (14). The family saga progresses and becomes enmeshed in the political events in East Africa under colonialism, with Matamu under German domination, the outbreak of the First World War, and the Maji Maji revolt, which “spread like a bush fire in the night across more than a quarter of the country (17). Huseni gets involved in the Maji Maji oath taking, is chased by the Germans and their African *askaris*, and takes refuge in his father's house where he is kept in a hideout for three days. This sobers him, and subsequently, his father marries him off to Moti. Gulam, Dhanji's son by Fatima, marries Mongi who is called Ji Bai. Thus we see the branching out of Dhanji's family on two lines of
inheritance—the African and the Indian. The family business flourishes and Dhanji becomes the *mukhi* of Matamu when Ragavji Devraj retires. If history traces the rise and fall of civilizations, Vassanji’s family saga traces the rise and fall in the fortunes of Dhanji Govindji’s family. His downfall begins with his estrangement with Huseni who is suspected of seeing his mother and consorting with the slave people. He reproaches Huseni thus: “You fool . . . you are descended from the Solar Race! What do you have to consort with slaves for?” (22). Unable to bear his father’s accusation any more, Huseni spits at his father’s feet and leaves, never to return. For Dhanji the first generation immigrant, assimilation into the cultural space of the adopted land is unthinkable. But for the later generations, Africa is the only place they have known and they seem to be more assimilated.

In Vassanji’s literary space, the Asians, and the Shamsis in particular, occupy the narrative centre; it is the marginalized people who occupy the centre stage in Vassanji’s fiction, as in all postcolonial writings. The first part of the book is named “Ji Bai” after Dhanji’s daughter-in-law, the matriarch of the family who possesses the gunny sack that is eventually, passed over to Salim who is “one-eighth” African by Bibi Taratibu’s line of ancestry. The two branches of Dhanji’s family are thus linked. By naming the second part “Kulsum” after Huseni’s daughter-in-law, Vassanji turns to that branch of Dhanji Govindji’s family destined to inherit the half-caste status of Huseni. Huseni’s son
Juma, Juma’s son Salim and Salim’s daughter Amina are the succeeding generations that fall in this line of ancestry. Salim’s name, in the official records, is written as Huseni Salim Juma. As fate would have it, it is Salim who spells out his name when his neighbour, Uncle Goa takes him to be admitted to school after his father, Juma dies. In the entire family, only Salim has to bear the name of his grandfather, which makes him different from the rest. He inherits the black complexion of his father and is nicknamed “Kala”—a term which is both Indian and African. Apart from meaning “black,” in the Indian context, it is also a colour in the African National flag. Vassanji uses the name deliberately to suggest this duality: “... to choose a name which was deliberately ambiguous, one which could be both Indian and African and thus describe my narrator” (Kanaganayakam, Configurations 128). Jamal, the youngest son is named “Sona” as he is golden in colour and is the pet of the family. All the other members in the family take the name Dhanji that has an affluent tone about it. Though Salim is not the rightful heir, Vassanji chooses him as the preserver and transmitter of tradition by making him the custodian of the gunny sack, which all the other members of the family want to burn as it reflects the family’s shame and bad luck. Vassanji draws Salim from the marginal position of a half-caste (“one-eighth African”), and places him at the centre of his narrative.

That hierarchy exists even within the family, and that even margins have their centres is evident from the centre / margin conflicts between
the members of the two lines of inheritance. All members falling in Taratibu’s line of ancestry are treated as second-class citizens in one way or the other. When Dhanji marries the squint-eyed Fatima, his five-year-old, half-caste son Huseni stays with them like a stepson in his own father’s house. Fatima has only hatred for Bibi Taratibu’s descendants. “Tell me, what is my sin, that I should inherit this slave’s son with my marriage . . .” (28). In Awal’s (Moti’s sister) house where Juma grows up, he is given a stepmotherly treatment. His pedigree being known, he is discriminated against by the rest of the family. “There he grew up a second-class citizen, nothing more than a glorified servant, whom the family sent away on pretexts when important guests arrived . . .” (63). When Juma marries Kulsum, the narrator’s mother, she is also pushed to the periphery in Awal’s house. Kulsum being the third of the seven daughters of Mitha Diwano Kanji, has no choice other than marrying Juma, the uncouth son of the half-caste Huseni. However she succeeds in grabbing her husband from the extended family and tries her best to hush up her humble origins. Kulsum does not want her husband’s black ancestry to cast a shadow on her children’s future, especially that of her daughters, as she wishes to find them good Shamsi grooms. “Black ancestry was not something you advertised . . . . A whiff of African blood from the family tree would be like an Arctic blast, it would bring the mercury of social standing racing down to unacceptable levels” (150). By throwing light on the hierarchies within Dhanji’s family, Vassanji seems
to convey the idea that history—whether family, communal, or national—is basically about power and how power is always wielded by the dominant group as an instrument to subjugate those at the margins.

The rest of Vassanji’s saga, after Huseni’s disappearance, focuses on Dhanji’s futile attempts to recover his half-caste son for Africa—a son who is “tall and muscular, a bull of a man as strong as Bhima” (25). From Matamu to Mombasa, from Kibwezi to Voi and Mozambique he travels in vain, while his daughter-in-law, Ji Bai keeps vigil. After waiting for two years, Huseni’s fickle-minded wife, Moti remarries. Her third marriage, the fact that she entrusts her children by her two previous marriages to a relative, and her subsequent death in childbirth—all prevent Dhanji from recovering even Juma, Huseni’s son. In Dhanji’s absence, Fatima takes over the control of the household and entrusts the family business with her sons, thereby ousting him from the centre of the family. “Slowly he became a guest in his own house” (30). His grief and futile journeys affect his mind. In 1912, one December morning, while returning from the mosque, he is brutally murdered. Following the disintegration of the Shamsi community in India several years ago, various parties have sprung up, with diverging fundamentalist positions. The bone of contention among the various factions—Shia, Sunni, Sufi and Vedantic—has been regarding funds collected in the small centres and mosques. Dhanji stops sending money to the big centres and keeps it in trust for the Matamu community. The strife among the various factions
has resulted in murders in Bombay and Zanzibar and now in Matamu (GS 42-3). This explains the reason for Dhanji’s murder.

While disposing off her husband’s possessions, Fatima entrusts Ji Bai with the task of burning the blood-stained shirts, which she does. But she treasures to the end of her life the muslin shirt and the three padlocked books containing community accounts written in secret codes.

In 1915, after Dhanji’s death, Gulam, at the age of twenty-four, becomes the mukhi of Matamu. He and Ji Bai have a crop of five children. Having given these private details of the narrator’s family, Vassanji shifts his focus to very important political events in East Africa. News about the European War (between the British and the Germans) comes by word of mouth and gossip in the village. The fate of the Indian dukawallahs turns out to be precarious, as they are alien subjects in a time of war.

Under colonialism, the Indians in Africa served as a buffer zone between the colonizer and the native Africans: “Entering the African continent as traders from as early as the sixteenth century and later brought in by British imperialists to build the railway that was to link all of British Africa, the Indians have often occupied a privileged position vis-à-vis Africans in Africa” (George 290-1). The colonizers, by giving a semblance of privilege to a small minority (the African Asian) created a smoke screen for the large-scale discrimination practised against the native Africans. It was also a tactic for keeping the Africans and Asians at loggerheads after independence. Besides, it would also legitimize the
European claim that the nation was not safe in the hands of the indigenes—a justification for the colonizing mission. The Indians were placed in entrepreneurial roles under the British Raj in East Africa and were made to pay a heavy price for it in the post-independence period. In colonial times, the tripartite division of the community was strictly maintained. Thus in *The Gunny Sack*, we are told how the beautiful white European buildings in Matamu rise in spires, the government buildings being fit for a king. Behind the white European face of the town is the modest Indian district, and behind it, the African quarter going right into the forest—“every community in its own separate area” (29). Thus the social hierarchies are very strictly observed to keep the three races apart.

The personal history of the Shamsis is very closely linked with that of East Africa as the British wrest the land from the Germans and establish their control over it. The insecurity of the Asians in times of war is reflected in their being frequently shifted from place to place under British control, as they are British subjects. Expecting a fierce British attack on Matamu, the German customer Bwana Wasi advises Gulam to take his family a few miles inland until the war is over. It is expected that the British will attack Matamu from sea and land. “If the British attack, the Africans can run to the bushes, but where will you run?” (48), asks Bwana Wasi. To make matters worse, Gulam has to suffer great loss as the paper money handed over to him by the German officer in Matamu, proves worthless under British rule. So when he moves to Rukanga along
with his family and tries to settle down near the African quarters, he has to start afresh, even leaving behind the tainted name of his father and adopting the Arab name Hasham. Other members of the community also follow, so that the community in Matamu, fifty years old or more, vanishes overnight. Gulam and his family reach Rukanga at a time when supplies are running short. They go in search of the Rukanga mukhi’s help. Fierce battle takes place at night. Deserters loot houses and rape young girls. On one such night, Ji Bai gags her little daughter Mongi lest her cries should invite trouble from the soldiers. The next morning, she finds the child dead. The people of Rukanga hear about the ignominious defeat of the British by the smaller German force. It is said that the Germans used the aid of bees, and there are no fighters more ferocious than bees. From Rukanga, the community moves to the safety of Dar as it has already been taken over by the British

They reach Dar es Salaam almost penniless and have to start from scratch. Borrowing and buying on credit they set up a small dukan. The rise and fall of a family as well as the Asian experience in East Africa over four generations, is very convincingly summed up in Ji Bai’s words: “...our fortunes never rose again, we were mukhis once, people called us Shariffu, Germans called us Bwana, but for forty years and more we stayed poor, changing trades, trying this and trying that, moving from here to there” (53). They blame it on the sin of one man. When his own finance runs dry, Dhanji dips into the community funds to finance the
informants and agents who go in search of his half-caste son. But Ji Bai, who has a soft corner for her father-in-law, wonders: "... but how can you blame an entire war on the sin of one man?" (53). Dhanji’s family lives in guilt and shame. Gulam becomes a missionary in the 1930s. His death in a car accident makes him a martyr, and his martyrdom saves the family name and gradually they begin to prosper.

Intra-community division is something that belittles the Asians among the native Africans, a fact that becomes obvious in the election of the Tanganyika Legislative Council. While the rest of the multiracial society sees the Asians as one community, the Asians see themselves as “Shamsi, Bohra, Ismaili, Hindu, Sikh, Memon, Ithnashri” (146). When the Europeans leave East Africa, there is a reversal of power structures. The Asians are pushed to the margins; Black chauvinism and reverse racism become the order of the day in independent East Africa. These racial conflicts become a major motif in The Gunny Sack and several other stories in Uhuru Street (1992), specifically in “Ali,” “The Driver” and “What Good Times We Had.” The privileges enjoyed by the African Asians in colonial times from their white colonizers, and their unwillingness to integrate with the native Africans are regarded as the main reasons for the bitterness and hatred of the Africans.

The Asians watch with trepidation the coming of TANU and Julius Nyerere to power. The political climate in East Africa changes; it moves towards independence. Madaraka or self-government is declared on 15
December 1959, and Julius Nyerere becomes President. The Asians remain aloof from even the most momentous event in the nation’s history—the Independence Day Celebrations. As British subjects, they are loyal to the British. Hardly a year after independence, there is clamour for Africanization everywhere. The demagogues are out to provoke reaction against the Asians. "The Asians are not integrating enough! . . . If you want to stay in Africa, you must learn to live with Africans . . . . The days of your dukas are numbered" (162). Servants turn against their masters and the fundi (tailor) Omari demands back-pay for six years from Kulsum, as he is now a Union worker. It was estimated that "when he was paid the arrears Omari would just walk into the shop and own it" (153). In the sixties, some of the teachers from the Shamsi Boys’ Secondary School, which is the pride of the community, make their way to the West. Mr. Datoo the Maths teacher leaves for the US and comes back a few years later with an American wife. Kulsum’s Goan neighbours also leave. Yasmin, aunt Gula’s daughter leaves for London to pursue a course in nursing. It is "... Goodbye, Dar, good morning London" (172). But for Kulsum, "... We have nowhere to go. We were all born here" (165). Later Salim’s sister Begum marries Harris, the Physics teacher from Britain and they leave for London. Many members of the Asian community thus migrate to the West. Vassanji’s family saga thus gets enmeshed in the political history of the country.
The 60s are also a period of political turmoil in East Africa. Says the narrator: “Dates become important: you realise now why they invented the calendar—to turn events into dates, the artefacts, the knickknacks of yesterday that you store away in your gunny somewhere” (GS 173). We are told about the assassination of Kennedy on 23 November 1963, and Kenya and Zanzibar becoming independent in December 1963. People look forward to the formation of the federation—the United States of East Africa. This remains an unfulfilled dream as Zanzibar is soon taken over by Field Marshal Okello. Asian refugees from Zanzibar keep pouring in; a week after the Zanzibar revolution, Dar is rife with rumours that the army will take over and that the British will return. The looting of Indian shops by the Blacks follows. Political leaders like the Chinese Premier Chou-en-Lai, visit Dar. Documents involving the Western countries are discovered, with plans to overthrow the country. Through this minute documentation of historical details, Vassanji gives a sense of credibility to his narrative.

The final section of The Gunny Sack titled “Amina” after Salim’s African girlfriend, deals with the coming of age of the fourth generation—that of Kala and Sona—and focuses on the political events of the 1960s and early 1970s revolving around Tanzanian independence. The National Service is set up to “provide military training, political awareness and literacy to motivated youth with a right head on their shoulders, from whose ranks the Tanganyika People’s Defence Forces
were to be recruited” (195-96). Salim meets Amina at the camp. She always addresses him as “Indian.” Salim’s response is: “Why do you call me Indian? I too am an African. I was born here. My father was born here—even my grandfather,” to which Amina replies: “And then? Beyond that?” (211). She is able to accept him only as an Indian. She accuses Salim with the remark that his ancestors financed the slave trade, but he retorts: “. . . If mine financed the slave trade, yours ran it. It was your people who took guns and whips and burnt villages in the interior, who brought back boys and girls in chains to Bagamoyo. Not all, you too will say . . .” (211). Arun Mukherjee, in her article “Writing from a Hard Place: The African Fiction of M. G. Vassanji,” remarks that Vassanji’s book reveals a shocking reality that India imported slaves from Africa up to the nineteenth century, a fact one seldom comes across in any history book (59-69). Salim’s grand-uncle (Gulam) buys a slave from his fleeing German customer in 1915, ten years after slavery has been technically abolished under German rule: “The retainer, as the German would explain, was born in 1903 and technically was a slave” (GS 47). Bibi Taratibu, the slave woman whom Dhanji “uses” and “discards,” is bought for thirty rupees in 1885, a purchase that has gained entry in his diary. Thus *The Gunny Sack* helps to fill up those neglected areas in the pages of canonical history.

The six months in National Service, away from home and families, bring about a great change in the boys of Kala’s generation. They become
boys who think about the world—boys who assert their ideas. Anti-American and anti-Vietnam War feelings are roused in the youth. Salim’s university days are eventful in the company of the fiery Amina Saidi and like-minded student revolutionaries. Later, Amina leaves for New York on a scholarship. Salim’s brother Jamal (Sona) goes to the US to study history. Tanzania soon becomes the scene for many political changes. The Parliament of Tanzania passes the Uniform Law of Marriage. Accordingly, marriages are to take place with the full consent of the intending spouses. But a contradictory event takes place when four teenaged girls are forced to marry old, bearded sheiks who are thrice their age. It is at this juncture that Amina Saidi returns to Dar with her white American boyfriend. Nyerere’s *Ujamaa* Socialism gains momentum. Nationalization of banks and confiscation of private properties follow. It comes as a great shock for the Indians whose flourishing businesses are taken over by the government. Hassan uncle’s Ushirika Medical Store is not spared and it culminates in Hassan’s and his wife’s migration to Canada where their son has already settled.

The expulsion of Asians from Uganda in 1972 by President Idi Amin has its repercussions in Tanzania too. There is a general feeling that the Asians are sabotaging the economy of Africa, that they are not integrating and that they are not allowing their daughters to marry Africans. While nationalization of commercial properties continues in the midst of state-wide protests, Ji Bai alone is seen to live in harmony with
the Africans. In one of her meetings with Amina Saidi, Ji Bai says that she is assimilated enough to be mother to any African boy. “But elsewhere, where there was money, a new language had developed” (246). It is all talk about shillings and pounds, and exchange of currency. Even people who speak about the moral degeneracy of the West are seen trying to immigrate to these countries. Salim who is a teacher at BOSS, the school where he has studied, marries Zuleika, also a teacher in a neighbouring school. Amina and Mark are also teachers. Amina holds intellectual discussions with people, and makes them aware of the all pervasiveness of politics. Her house becomes a rendezvous for like-minded people. A daughter is born to Salim and Zuleika. A local religious personage, much to Zuleika’s shock, christens her daughter “Amina,” for which she never forgives Salim. “She never forgave me Amina. Amina the girl and Amina the name” (258). As part of Preventive Detention, Amina Saidi and a few of her revolutionary friends are detained for conspiracy to overthrow the government. Fearing a similar plight, Salim, with the help of a friend, escapes to Boston, which is the situation when the novel begins.

Caught in the claustrophobic basement room of his apartment in North America, Salim narrates the story of his people who have been generations of wanderers, and looks at the growth of a nation from colonial to postcolonial times. He decides to discard the gunny sack as he feels that the past is “to be remembered and acknowledged, if only partly
understood, without the baggage of paraphernalia” (268). The gunny sack gives Salim the right perspective about the past; he packs the three padlocked books to be sent to Sona “to be anaesthetized . . . for the peckings of academia” (268). Being an academician and a researcher in the history of his community, Sona is expected to decode the secrets in the padlocked books. Salim decides to go back to Dar as he wishes that the “runaway” history of his forebears should end with him. Says Salim: “Let this be the last runaway, returned, with one last, quixotic dream” (268). Accepting the banal present, with a firm footing in the past, Salim asserts his faith in the future. His daughter, Amina, back in Dar, stands as a symbol of promise and hope and seems to be the force pulling him back to his homeland. Thus Vassanji’s narrative ends on a note of optimism.

Through *The Gunny Sack*, Vassanji tries to project the idea that the preservation and transmission of history is a communal act involving different individuals and incorporating several generations. Thus Ji Bai listens to Dhanji’s myths of his beginnings and the stories of his travels in search of his son Huseni. Later Salim sits at Ji Bai’s feet and learns his history. The history that is passed on to Salim is the history of private family stories and also important public events. This “accretion of stories over generations” (GS 66), includes numerous stories told by people other than Ji Bai. He also listens to the stories told by his sister Begum in the story telling sessions each night and learns much about her school and classmates. The other story tellers are his mother Kulsum and Edward the
tailor who used to hold Salim in rapt attention with his tales and jokes. No less is Ahmed’s info-service. “Ahmed sold information and thrills” (139). Stories from the newspaper and the BBC add to Salim’s composite memory. “All these stories join his own personal memory and together form the collective memory of his people” (Bucknor 22). The South Asian writer, Arnold Harichand Itwaru has a word to say about this wonderful novel. “. . . The Gunny Sack contemplatively recollects the memory of the Islamic Asian experience in East Africa. As both literary art and critical documentation, where the fiction enters history and is entered by it, The Gunny Sack is a unique accomplishment” (Itwaru 115).

Through the wonderful anecdote of the model of a ship presented to Juma, Vassanji tries to create an intellectual link between history and the novel. Juma’s children name the two-foot long model steamer SS Nairobi for want of a better name. Once Salim happens to see a ship in the harbour very much like the model they have at home. But later when he returns to confirm it, he finds that the ship has sailed away. His comment is: “The past is just this much beyond reach, you can reconstruct it only through the paraphernalia it leaves behind in your gunny sack . . . and then who would deny that what you manufacture is only the model” (127). If history is a model, “a reconstruction based on an original experience,” whose veracity is often questioned, “can the novel replace or supplement it?” (Sarvan, “A Reflection” 517). Sarvan says that a novel, especially one based on history, is also a model and therefore it is also not
free from the limitations of history; history as well as the novel is constructed. Hence literature is not superior to history, which is one of the assumptions of New Historicism. Each could be re-written and re-interpreted, thereby blurring the boundary between history and fiction. In his interview with Shane Rhodes, Vassanji remarks that if the same person writes the history of a particular era at two different times, two different versions of the same history will emerge. This idea is endorsed by Salim’s comment towards the end of the novel that if he puts back the contents of the gunny sack and takes them out one by one, something different will emerge. This in turn reinforces the idea that history is not a neat, well-ordered, chronological sequence of facts, but a haphazard collection of events; it “undermines any colonialist discourse which presents history as fact, unitary and linear” (Bucknor 19).

The starting point for a probe into the past, in The Book of Secrets, is the discovery of the 1913 diary of a junior colonial officer Alfred Corbin seventy-five years after he loses it. This diary is used as a tool to reconstruct the colonial history of the Kenya of that time. Accepting the challenge—“You taught history, sir. Can you write it?” (4)—from Feroz, a former student and now his benefactor, Pius Fernandes sets out to recreate history. The retired history teacher is fascinated by the hints, mysteries, and secrets in the diary entries. While unravelling the secrets of the diary and the stories of the people in it, he is drawn into the vortex of the story and simultaneously, tells his own story.
The plot of *The Book of Secrets* has two strands—the present in which the retired Goan teacher comes in possession of the diary written by Alfred Corbin in 1913, and the past of the diary entries themselves, whose gaps and omissions Fernandes imaginatively fills with his own narrative. There are books-within-the-book in Vassanji’s *The Book of Secrets*:

The outer book, the enveloping narrative is told or invented by Pius Fernandes . . . . The inner book, kernel or catalyst for the outer, is a fragmentary diary belonging to Alfred Corbin . . . who comes to British East Africa in 1913. The outer action involves the history of the Shamsi Muslim community, immigrants from India from World War I, when the community is helplessly caught up in the British-German border struggle, to independence for Tanzania and subsequent remigration or dispersal of many Shamsis—a story previously told in part in Vassanji’s earlier novels *The Gunny Sack* and *No New Land*. (Thorpe 210)

In his interview with John Clement Ball, Vassanji talks about the genesis of *The Book of Secrets*. While engaged in active research for his debut novel *The Gunny Sack*, one of his sources was old people, apart from looking up the past in documents from archives. Diaries and colonial documents are important sources for studying colonial history, which Vassanji makes use of in *The Book of Secrets*. “The book explores
the concept of historiography, that is, the method of writing by exploring records and memories, the imaginative reconstruction of a lived experience that has to recapture an era or a time that is in the past" (Narula 115). The book has an oscillatory temporal structuring beginning in 1988, going back to 1913, and again moving forward to 1988, obstructing linear and chronological modes of narrating history. Fernandes’s grand design is:

I would—I told myself—recreate the world of that book. I would breathe life into the many spirits captured in its pages so long ago and tell of their stories; and I would revive the spirit of the book itself, tell its own story. And I would construct a history, a living tapestry and join the past to the present, to defy the blistering, shimmering dusty bustle of city life outside which makes transients of us all. (BS 8)

In the process of writing an objective history, Fernandes finds that he is also drawn into it, constructing (his)story. Corbin’s diary forms only about a quarter of the length of the novel. With this as the starting point, Fernandes adds to it his own personal Miscellany, numbering five in all, through which he reconstructs the history or rather the personal narratives of all the characters already mentioned in the diary jottings of Alfred Corbin.

Corbin, who is posted as Assistant District Commissioner in Kikono, a small village in British East Africa, becomes closely associated
with the family of the village headman and religious leader Jamali, his beautiful and enigmatic niece Mariamu, and her husband Pipa. On his first arrival to Kikono, Corbin gets a fleeting glimpse of a beautiful girl, draped in white who disappears behind the bush and trees. She is Mariamu, who is reminiscent of an ethereal being and remains shrouded in mystery to the very end. Corbin’s first encounter with Pipa occurs when he is brought before him on a charge of espionage as he is suspected of spying for the Germans. Mariamu then pleads with Corbin to release Pipa to whom she is betrothed. She suffers from fits of hysteria and once Corbin saves her from an exorcist who beats her up to drive away the evil spirit that haunts her. He places her in the Christian Mission where she recovers within a few days. Later her uncle the mukhi brings her to Corbin’s house where she is to stay as cook and housekeeper until her marriage.

Mariamu is fascinated by the mysterious book in which Corbin makes his entries every night, her curiosity being roused when he tells her that he has written about her too. There are many hints in the diary entries that suggest the growing intimacy between Mariamu and Corbin, especially the entry about her nursing him during his illness. In one of the entries Corbin states:

I found myself explaining the political map of Europe to her . . . my reason for being here leaving that fairy land to come to this darkness, where the kerosene lamp casts our long
shadows, on the walls and outside the hyena barks and the night owl shrieks—where I have no one of my kind. To help your people . . . (80)

The European’s civilizing mission is justified here. Pipa, the shopkeeper from the German occupied town of Moshi, marries Mariamu, but on their first night, he realises that she is not a virgin. He raises a hue and cry, which brings the mukhi and the rest of the folk to his door. Rashid spreads rumours that he has seen the girl sleeping with Corbin. Corbin applies for leave but soon Britain declares war on Germany. Everyone is caught in Kikono. Corbin and his small police force are called away from Kikono to Voi. While he is addressing the village elders before taking leave, Mariamu steals his diary and fountain pen. The diary, which ends abruptly at this point, with more than four months of empty pages, is passed on to Fernandes by Feroz who unearths the diary accidentally from a recess in the wall of the backroom in Pipa’s house, which is now owned by him.

Fernandes’s personal entries in the notebook begin from here. In his enthusiasm to follow the trail of this book, Fernandes travels far and wide like a detective, examining documents and writing to friends and former students abroad seeking details regarding the characters who figure in his narrative. In the course of his research, Fernandes “saw an old world give birth to a new, no less fragile one, and I followed the trail of this book, . . . to myself, and the hidden longings of my past . . .” (8).
The diary serves as an interlinking device not only because it throws light on the life and perspectives of the British colonial officer in East Africa in the wake of the First World War, but also because it establishes links with chains of events that span three generations and spread over three continents. *The Book of Secrets* is a strange meeting of streams, that is, of "personal narratives." Thus we come to know of Jamali's past, his arrival in East Africa, his marriage to the Swahili woman Khanoum, how he becomes the *mukhi* of Kikono, and how after Mariamu's gruesome rape and murder, and after Pipa's second marriage in the post-war years, their fair-skinned, grey-eyed son Ali, whose parentage is contested, is brought up by the Jamalis along with their three half-caste children. The plight of the Jamalis, after they leave Kikono to settle in Moshi where the *mukhi* dies a year later, is narrated by young Jamali, the former's grandson when Fernandes meets him in the library at Moshi from where he tries to recover Corbin's memoir titled *Heart and Soul*.

Picking up the strands of Fernandes' narrative, we learn that as the war progresses, the relationship between Pipa and Mariamu improves. Although doubts about his wife's virginity linger in his mind, Pipa does not reject Mariamu. He decides to take her to Moshi where he has his mother, a thriving business, and friends and benefactors to help him. But unfortunately, as the European War has already started, there is no hope of crossing the border. Besides, being already suspected of spying for the Germans, his plight in the village of Kikono in British East Africa is even
more precarious. It is a European War that is being fought, but has its impact on the indigenes and the immigrants alike.

The War causes great panic among the Asians: “to go—abandoning all or not” (BS 115). In the initial days of the War, the atmosphere is rife with rumours. News about Dar being bombed by the British causes great concern among the trading Indian people whose only concern is their life, property and progeny. As stated in The Gunny Sack:

Among the trading immigrant peoples, loyalty to a land or a government . . . is a trait one can normally look for in vain. Governments may come and go, but the immigrants’ only concern is the security of their families, the trade and savings. Deviants to this code come to be regarded and dismissed as not altogether sound of mind. (GS 52)

The Great War continues and news reaches Kikono that the Germans have taken the border port at night. There is an influx of refugees from the town of Taveta to the Shamsi mosque. A fortnight after the outbreak of war, Captain Frank Maynard, who has been under suspension pending enquiry, is reinstated as he has a thorough knowledge of the place. Maynard’s fury is unleashed on Pipa. The helpless Pipa is forced to spy for both the British and the Germans. Mariamu delivers a son in 1915, while the War progresses. The fact that the child is fair-skinned and grey-eyed worries Pipa.
Events that unfold in Moshi have adverse effects on Pipa. The Germans, on the basis of a very misleading letter from Kikono, hang one of his former acquaintances, the Arab Hamisi, who is actually an ally of the Germans. Hamisi’s Sufi friends suspect Pipa of being the culprit behind the letter. One of his men comes to Pipa’s shop and asks him to spy for Hamisi’s people, to prove that he is innocent. The helpless Pipa has to comply, and this culminates in his arrest by the brutal British soldier Frank Maynard. Pipa’s experience is just one instance of the way in which ordinary people, who have no say in the European War, are subject to harassment in colonial times. After Pipa’s release from the lock-up, he finds his wife brutally raped and murdered. Later, while ransacking Mariamu’s belongings, he comes across Corbin’s diary and fountain pen. He keeps the diary as a sacred object as he believes that it will provide answers to the many riddles that plague him. When the War ends, Pipa goes back to Moshi where he marries the mukhi’s (Jaffer’s) daughter Remti. As she refuses to bring up Mariamu’s son Ali, he is placed under the care of the Jamalis. After the War, Kikono is totally cut off from the rest of the world as no new administrator comes to this village. The Shamsi community, including the Jamalis thus leave Kikono—some of them gravitating to Dar, with the Jamalis putting up at Moshi.

Fernandes learns from Jamali’s grandson, at Moshi, that after Jamali’s death, Khanoum is totally ignored by the community that she has
embraced so wholeheartedly. She struggles to bring up the four children, three of her own and the Indian boy in her keep. When Ali / Aku is six years old, he is offered a job as garden *toto* in a European *memsahib’s* house. She is Annie Corbin, wife of Alfred Corbin who has assumed office as the new DC at Moshi. When Corbin learns of the boy’s connections to Jamali, he sends for Khanoum and offers to help her to send the boy to school. But Khanoum refuses to accept any help. Soon the elders of the community come to claim Ali. Khanoum’s response is: “I too have been leader of the community . . . . Does the black self lessen in value now that the brown partner is gone?” (197). The racial prejudice of the African Asians finds expression in the community’s attitude towards Khanoum. Later Pipa claims the boy, and he goes to live with his father. Mariamu visits Pipa in his dreams. She is given a niche of her own where the sacred book is placed with awe and reverence. The boy Akber Ali grows up into a dashing young man and marries Shehrbanoo, the daughter of a thriving businessman.

Corbin’s memoir *Heart and Soul*, which Fernandes recovers from the library at Moshi, has three parts. The first part is about the travails of a young Assistant District Commissioner; the second, throws light on the officers serving and taking sides with the Enemy Forces in German East Africa; the third part of the memoir is about Hamisi, Master of the Karimiya Sufi Order in Moshi and their link with seditious elements in Egypt and the Sudan. Fernandes also understands that the Karimiya Order
has involved in hostile military operations and also intelligence operations against the British in East Africa at least since 1912. They have also been involved in the bombing of the Voi-Taveta Railway.

Fernandes' narrative takes a new turn with Rita's sudden appearance on the scene. She is Ali's second wife, and Pipa's daughter-in-law. Her gift of a posthumous collection of poems by Gregory, reminds Fernandes of his past as a teacher in Dar, his relationship with Gulnar Rejani now Rita, his shady relationship with the homosexual Englishman Gregory, and Gregory's relationship with the Corbins. The various strands thus become interlinked. Even people who do not seem to have any role in the narrative are gradually drawn into it by some mysterious force. We come to know of Rita's student days in the Shamsi Girls' School where the Catholic Goan immigrant Pius Fernandes has been teacher, of her fascination for him which he discourages, of Rita's elopement with Ali, their subsequent marriage, divorce, and amicable settlement, of their married daughter and son, and of Ali's marriage to the Argentinean woman, which is the situation when Rita, now a divorcee, meets Fernandes.

Along with these interlinking personal narratives, Fernandes takes the reader through the socio-political changes in the world scenario and also within the country, which is on the verge of independence. The migrations of the sixties see many teachers from the Dar Shamsi School moving to the Euro-American world in pursuit of job and higher
education. Fernandes also joins the University of London to pursue a compulsory diploma in education and to “see history take substance before one’s own eyes . . . to see Englishmen in their own habitats . . .” (BS 270). On his return to Dar, Fernandes feels the winds of change blowing in East Africa. A new government comes to power. People are asked to renounce their former citizenship, to bid goodbye to a prized British subjecthood for a brave new world. “Changes came at breakneck speed, dismantling old structures, racing us towards the egalitarian Utopia that—most surely we were told—awaited us” (306). One such change is the take over of the Shamsi Boys’ School by the government. The ruling party’s Socialist policies reach its peak in the nationalization of rental properties in 1972, which is a big blow to the Asians. From the shock of confiscation of their private properties, Hassam Punja, one of the richest businessmen in Dar, and Nurmohamed Pipa pass away. Dar also witnesses a third death—that of Gregory—which goes largely unnoticed. It is interesting to note the change in attitudes that has come about with the achievement of independence. Gregory’s death, which would have been “a local event of some magnitude and meaning,” as a teacher who had taught their boys for more than two decades and who couldn’t pass English Literature without him, has now become “an expatriate event” (313).

Fernandes collects a box, “the debris of a life” (318), which Gregory entrusts with the Anglican Church long before his death. He
comes across letters, three from Alfred Corbin and eighteen from Annie Corbin, written to Gregory between 1937 and 1972. The fact that the three of them have known each other very closely comes as a revelation to Fernandes. In the letters there is mention about Corbin’s missing diary and the fountain pen. Corbin comes across a pen with Commissioner Barnes, which is similar to the one he has lost. Barnes tells Corbin that a police clerk, who bought it from a local shopkeeper named Pipa, had presented it to him. In his letter, Corbin asks Gregory to collect the diary and the pen in case they are recovered. In one of her letters, Annie has mentioned the meeting between Corbin and Akber Ali. This is yet another revelation for Fernandes and his investigative mind works further regarding their meeting, and imagines Corbin confiding in Ali about their relationship. He expects Rita to know the secret of Ali’s paternity, and is optimistic that he will get the secret out of Rita. But Rita’s response is:

Yes, why make public our pasts, belittle ourselves, when we’ve come so far. So what if he isn’t a chief’s son in exile, what if he was a Kariakoo boy covered with turmeric . . . a ball boy for Europeans . . . a garden toto . . . . No, sir—Pius—this is the price I’m going to ask—which you’ve known all along, and I hold you to it. Let it lie, this past. The diary and the stories that surround it are now mine, to bury. (298)
The past matters, of course. However, in Rita’s case, it is better buried. This is endorsed by Amin Malak’s words: “The present and the future can never be divorced from the past, therefore, her children’s *nouveau riche* status in Europe need not be jeopardised by ‘unnecessary’ revelations about the past” (“Colonialism Retold” 151).

Burying the past seems to be a recurring motif in Vassanji’s works, though with differences. It is not to be seen as a way of repudiating the past or belittling it. On the other hand it is to be seen as a way of acknowledging the past and getting rid of the repressive influences and unpleasant experiences. Undue obsession with the past may prove detrimental to the understanding of the present reality, which is necessary for adjustment in the land of adoption. Rita’s desire to bury the past is quite obvious as the past poses a threat to the present status of her family. For Salim, the sack which is a treasure chest of memory aids help him to memorize past events and construct the history of his family which is inextricably related to that of his community and the land of his birth. When its use runs out, Salim discards the old gunny, preserving the most important artifacts—the three padlocked books—for Sona to decode. Discarding the sack can be seen as a symbolic act of acknowledging it and carrying over the values of the past to the present in order to understand the present better. The fact that the secrets in the padlocked books cannot be fully resolved is an indication that history cannot provide whole truths. With this understanding, Salim embraces the banal present.
Just as the paternity of Mariamu’s son remains a secret, history is also a book of secrets which cannot offer whole truths. In *No New Land*, Missionary helps Nurdin to bury the repressive influences of the past and face the challenges of the present. In *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall*, Vic returns to Kenya to liberate himself from his guilt-laden past by confiding in the Anti Corruption Commission his involvement in shady business deals, so as to have a clean start. Unable to do so, he has to escape from the land of his birth and relocate in Canada in order to address the demands of the present. Vassanji’s protagonists need the confirmation of the past to understand the present.

The epilogue, dated 12 August 1988, states facts that happen three months after Fernandes hands over the diary to Rita, and promises to give up all the research material related to the reconstruction of the world of Corbin’s diary. Fernandes’s book, which he believes will be a new book of secrets, is as incomplete as the old one is. It is simply “A book of half lives, partial truths, conjecture, interpretation, and perhaps even some mistakes” (332). Vassanji seems to tell the readers that this is indeed the craft of writing history as well as fiction. The history that Vassanji gives us is narrativized history which interjects fictional fabrications with historical facts. The time sequence is also disrupted as the past, present and future interweave.

*The Book of Secrets* tells the reader that mysteries do not get entirely solved, “... that sometimes, an unfinished tale is the most
fascinating one" (Venkataraman 5). The book remains open-ended, as we do not know who Ali’s father is. Is it Corbin or Rashid? Who is Mariamu’s murderer? Does Corbin confide in Ali the secret? It is the reader’s choice to arrive at conclusions. *The Gunny Sack* also has an inconclusive ending as we do not know whether Salim will return to Dar; equally dubious is Sona’s success in decoding the secrets of the padlocked books. *The Gunny Sack* and *The Book of Secrets* subject to detailed analysis, bear testimony to Vassanji’s skill as a master storyteller. Apart from being written records of unwritten histories, reconstructed from “the traces and the shards of the lived past” (Salat 83), these two novels serve in carving out a niche for his community of African Indians fictionalized as Shamsis. The world that Vassanji delineates in his books is one that is excluded from the received histories of the place. To Vassanji goes the credit of putting his place, Dar es Salaam on the literary map. Chandrika Balan’s comment that “*The Book of Secrets* is fiction, history and fantasy mixed in a scientifically accurate proportion by M.G. Vassanji, the scientist turned writer” (42) applies to *The Gunny Sack* as well.

The neglected part of history that Vassanji interpolates in his narratives is the Indian presence in East Africa—the roles they played and the lives they lived in the tripartite racial society of Africa in colonial and postcolonial times. During the Great War, “... the British with a conglomeration of colonial forces, fought the Germans in Africa and
eventually drove them from the territory that then became Tanganyika and is now Tanzania” (Woodcock 40-1). Woodcock further says that even before that, perhaps a generation or so before, many Muslims from Western India had crossed to Africa, and by 1914 they were scattered, mostly as merchants along the coast from Zanzibar to Capa Colony. Post-imperial developments, the achievement of independence by the former colonies, the rise of xenophobia and the confiscation of properties by vaguely Socialist governments eventually prompted many of their descendants to emigrate, and a large proportion of the present Indian community in Canada, including the author himself, were among them.

Fictionalising real persons and events is an important trait one finds in Vassanji’s writings—perhaps an attempt to disrupt the divide between history and fiction. He seems to fictionalise his own past by infusing autobiographical elements in the character of Salim, the protagonist-narrator of *The Gunny Sack*. Harold Barratt in his biography of M. G. Vassanji gives details about the writer’s childhood which seems to have striking parallels with that of Salim. Both Vassanji and the protagonist were born around the same period. The writer was born in Nairobi, Kenya and was brought up in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, as a member of a small Muslim Shamsi sect. Barratt says that when Vassanji was five years old, he lost his father, and his family shifted to Dar es Salaam where, his mother, with the support of her five children, ran a clothing shop. A similar situation is depicted in Salim’s life, with his
mother, Kulsum running a clothing shop after her husband Juma dies, with the help of five children—three her own and two her deceased sister's. Again, after serving as a conscript in the Tanzania National Service, Vassanji fled the country to London and later, America where he studied Physics and secured a PhD from MIT. In the novel, Salim also undergoes a period of conscription in the Tanzania National Service, though it is his brother Sona who pursues higher education in the US. In the US, Vassanji "studied Sanskrit, medieval Indian language and literature, as well as old Gujarati, avocations he uses to delineate the character of Sona in *The Gunny Sack*" (Barratt 445). In his interview with Chelva Kanaganayagam Vassanji admits that there are similarities in his life with that of Salim, but important differences too. "I gave Salim deeper roots in Africa, by making one of his ancestors an African, a slave woman. That fact is the driving force in the novel. Its African spirit. The novel has its own logic that is omnipotent, that even the author's life cannot violate" (*Configurations* 129).

Political personalities appear as important characters in Vassanji's novels. In his interview with Susheila Nasta, Vassanji says that, as he stays away from the land of his birth, he has the liberty of naming political leaders and actual events, a privilege not enjoyed by other African writers (Nasta 73). Thus Julius Nyerere is a character in *The Gunny Sack*, first appearing as a leader of a political party and later as the first President of Independent Tanzania. Alfred Corbin, whose diary
forms the pivot of *The Book of Secrets*, was the British Governor of Uganda in the 1940s. Jomo Kenyatta appears as a full-length character, as the first President of independent Kenya in *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall*. In the historian-narrator of *The Book of Secrets*, Pius Fernandes, Vassanji’s sees one of his teachers, many of whom were Goans. In his interview with Shane Rhodes, Vassanji remarks: “In fact *The Book of Secrets* is a tribute to my teachers . . .” (112). Captain Frank Maynard, Vassanji tells Shane Rhodes, is a fictionalised version of a real soldier whose diary he had read. Vassanji takes a writer’s liberty in fictionalizing public figures. In the “Author’s Note” to *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall*, Vassanji says: “This is a work of fiction. Although real public figures, especially the late President Jomo Kenyatta and the late J. M. Kariuki, appear in the novel, they do so as fictional characters only” (405).

The crux of Vassanji’s writings is his obsession with history, and he believes that the fictional mode is the best way for perceiving the history of a society, including that of the individual. Vassanji’s bewitching tales are not only a rich contribution to Canadian fiction in particular and postcolonial literature in general, but are also written records of unwritten histories, evoked from memory, truth and fantasy so that they become “stories not yet told,” to borrow the title of Stephen Smith’s interview with the author. In one of his interviews, Vassanji says that it was his fascination for the recorded histories of the Europeans that
gave him the impetus for chronicling the history of his people who possessed only some vague kind of oral history. By using a gunny sack and a colonial diary as tools for reconstructing the history of the Shamsis, Vassanji seems to offer a challenge to traditional historiography. For Michael Bucknor, Vassanji is "one of those postcolonial writers who deliberately set out to disrupt European notions of 'history' and the ordering of time" (20), for writing his community to existence.
Works Cited


