Chapter 4

The Hook of Secrets: Stolen Diary
M.G. Vassanji’s third novel, *The Book of Secrets*, was published in 1994. It’s a fine piece of work that foregrounds the themes and ideas that recur throughout M.G. Vassanji’s fiction. It is an engrossing account of Asians in East Africa. Rich in detail and description, this award winning fiction magnificently deals with immigrants and exiles. It appears as a story of displacement, physical and emotional, and one’s search for identity and a promised land. It explores the state of living in exile from one’s home and from oneself accepting multiculturalism.

This third novel, *The Book of Secrets*, is a spellbinding novel of generations and the sweep of history. The story of it is a memorable cast of characters, part of Asian community in East Africa, whose lives and fate the readers follow over the course of seven decades. It is an encompassing tale that flows through lives. It delves deep into the personal lives, love and caste system surrounding the African Indian society. It investigates notions of history and memory; enquiries into how much one can know about the past; ideas of home and community as they extend across time and space; and the insidious legacies of colonialism, war, race, prejudice and religious tolerance.

*The Book of Secrets* is a novel of the in-between. It explores the border between the self and the other, between giving voice and remaining silent, between the centre and periphery as well between the pure and the hybrid. Its text is located at the intersection between story and history, between the fictional and the factual as well as between realism and representational character of all art. It is a "post-colonial as well as post-modern novel."

The world of *The Book of Secrets* is part fiction - part memory, a history of the people who left Indian shores in search of a dream for Eastern Africa. Here the author focuses on the interaction between the Shamsi [Indian] community and native Africans. as well as the colonial return to India. the presence of the country ever return to India, the presence of the country looms throughout the novel. Here M.G. Vassanji’s engagement with the history is very significant. With it he has attempted to
explore his own past and the past of Indian community in East Africa. He has brilliantly and skillfully woven the past with the present. He discusses "how history affects the present and how personal and public history can overlap." (Ambivalent Affiliations and the Post-Colonial Condition: The Fiction of M.G. Vassanji. P.279).

The Book of Secrets is an eloquent story of the diary of Albert Corbin, a junior British colonial administrator, who has served many years in various East African colonies. Immediately before outbreak of World War I, he represents the British Empire as Assistant District Commissioner. He is posted to Kilkono, a tiny town near the border of Tanganyika. Immigrants from India, who came to east Africa in the second half of the 19th century, had founded this town. They became traders and over the generations, some of them prospered. They lived through two world wars, married within their community and lived within their faith. When independence came in 1960s, they were destroyed by the native powers. Thus M.G. Vassanji gives the readers the history of Indian settlements practically from their beginning to their almost destruction.

The plot of The Book of Secrets has two major strands. Writing with economy and precision M.G. Vassanji first gives portions of Corbin's diary itself, with its fresh views of colonial life. Then comes what Fernandes discovers in tracing the history of the book and the lives it has touched. There is a wonderful account of the World War I in East a young Shamsi Indian, Nurmoahmed Pipa, and his mysterious wilt Mariamu. They are the central characters. Nurmoahmed Pipa is given abundant scope in the novel. Mariamu had been Alfred Corbin's housekeeper. This Corbin fell in love with Mariamu who was betrothed to Nurmoahmed Pipa. Apparently, Mariamu on being married to Pipa is no longer a virgin. After marriage when she conceives, the question arises as to who is the father of her child. She bears a son, Ali, who has suspiciously light coloured skin and grey eyes. The second part of the novel follows Mariamu's son Ali's adventures as successful salesmen. He moves to London with his young wife named Rita. It is she who as a girl was a student of Fernandes and with whom Fernandes was in love.
Pius Fernandes, the protagonist of *The Book of Secrets*, is a former schoolteacher who has worked for several decades at a community school in the former German colony and British protectorate of Tanzania. In 1988 Pius accidentally gets hold of the diary of Alfred Corbin, a British colonial officer who has served many years in various East African colonies. Immediately before the outbreak of World War I he is District Administrator in Kilkino and Moshi. Corbin's diary interests and inspires Pius personally as well as professionally. He sets out to write a scholarly history of Tanzania from the end of the German colonial rule to the end of the 1980s.

The diary introduces Pius and Vassanji’s readers to the local Indian, African and Arab communities. It also familiarizes the readers with the central characters Mariamu and Pipa. Reading the novel, it is striking that while Pipa is given abundant scope, Vassanji denies Mariamu an independent voice. At the same time, there is no denying the fact that she is at the centre of the fictional universe Vassanji creates. In fact, she becomes an obsession for Pius’/Vassanji’s main character Pipa as well as for Pius himself. The secret that the title of Vassanji’s novel alludes to refers to a gap in Mariamu’s biography. Apparently, Mariamu on being married to Pius is no longer a virgin. When she conceives, the question arises as to who is the father of her child. The text, however, resists a definitive answer to that question, just as it refuses to shed light on the circumstances of Mariamu’s death. In the course of the novel, Pius becomes involved in the history he is about to write. The readers learn that he has fallen in love with Rita who at that time is married to Mariamu’s son Ali. Moreover, Pius finds out that he is linked to his historiographical project through an English friend and fellow teacher, Robert Gregory, who is friendly with Corbin and his wife.

The evolution of Asian African community as migrant people settled in East Africa is an important theme in *The Book of Secrets*. The perseverance of Asian African characters such as Nurmohamed Pipa and the attempts at making sense out of the geo-political tumult and social dynamics of change are also other narrative strands that are woven into M.G. Vassanji’s thematic web. The storyline of this novel is actually allegorical of Asian African personal and communal quests for success.
stability and rootedness in the face of dramatic terrestrial machinations. Indeed, M.G. Vassanji uses Pius Fernandes to narrate The Book of Secrets. Whereas the narrating voice is that of Fernandes, the chief character of the novel is actually Nurmohamed Pipa. The tale of this novel revolves round his character. Most of the narratives of The Book of Secrets is about life experience of Nurmohamed Pipa, on whom we place our focus in this chapter to show Vassanji’s diasporic articulation.

Nurmohamed Pipa is a metonym of the Asian African in East Africa. M.G. Vassanji has developed his character as a true diasporic figure. He is built around the stereotype of Asian African diaspora. However, his character is not developed in the way that Ngugi does Ramlagoon Dharmasah in Petals of Blood or Karen Blixen does Choleim Hussein in Out of Africa. The development of Nurmohamed Pipa’s character must be observed in the light of his historical experience as a member of migrant, racially distinct Asian African community. It would be better to mention that we are going to focus on Nurmohamed Pipa not only because the Book of Secrets chiefly revolves around his life but also because as Bhabha notes, within postcolonial studies "the stereotype, which is [a] major discursive strategy, is a form of knowledge and identification." It is very interesting to know that Pipa is not fixed stereotypical in the sense of Blixen’s Choleim or Ngugi’s Ramlagoon. On the contrary, Nurmohamed Pipa’s actions and character can’t be isolated by the contexts and spaces that make them logical, stock character out of his social matrix and contextual locations that render him meaningful. Without hesitation it may be added that his depiction gives the readers a fuller and conceptualized image of human being with a life, family, an origin, passions, ambitions, nightmares and challenges. He is cast in the ambivalent and ambiguity of the many worlds he occupies.

In Nurmohamed Pipa’s character M.G. Vassanji creates an Asian African character that can’t be treated as a lifeless piece of wood. He is a living being caught in the webs vicissitudes of his life as a colonial subject and postcolonial citizen in East Africa. He can be read as an authoritative symbolic vehicle that articulates the various dispossessions. Although the narrative worlds of The Book of Secrets is
populated with many familiar Asian African figures such as men and women, children and adults. Muslims and Hindus, rich and poor, strong and weak.

M.G. Vassanji’s *The Gunny Sack* appeared five years before *The Book of Secrets*. It is here the readers first see Nurmohamed Pipa through the narrator’s explanation: Mzee Pipa, Old Barrel was the oldest resident on the corner of Kichwele and Viongozi-streets. Also called Pipa corner. Interestingly, the Pipa who meets the readers in *The Book of Secrets* is the young Pipa. This Pipa is a character described in the diary of a colonial administrator, Alfred Corbin. As Pipa grows up, dreams, achieves, loses and dies. The narrator of *The Book of Secrets* is reconstructing him:

The younger Pipa is burly, quarrelsome youth traveling from the border town Moshi in Tanzania to Kikono on the Kenyan side to attend Sharnsi community celebrations in a bid to see a girl he intends to marry. (*The Book of Secrets*, P.46).

Struggle for identity is one of the important features of diaspora. M.G. Vassanji always attempts to establish the quest for identity through his works. His novel *The Rook of Secrets* is a beautiful example of his fictional efforts to resolve the enigma of identity. Through the vivid description of historical events like World War II, Vassanji portrays the cruel brutality that the people of East Africa underwent. The characters of Pius Fernandes, Pipa, Mariamu, Ali and Rita all are trying to establish their own relative identities with authenticity. The differentiation between Africans, Indians and White people projects the subtlety of the quest for identity.

*The Book of Secrets* attempts to write back into history a sense of mystery, of incomprehension, of a narrative stunned by its own inability to produce answers; the novel tries to include what-is-said as part of what-is-said, not as a necessary binary but rather as an integral part of knowledge: blindness and insight become component parts of each other. As Vassanji himself states, the mystery of the novel mimics "the mystery of everyday life".
Although Pius abandons his historiographical project, the possibility of writing histories is not ruled out as such. In the absence of historical truth, there is a choice between withdrawing to a fatalist position informed by the futility of any representational endeavour and looking for other forms of constructing meaning. The Book of Secrets offers two alternatives of constructing meaning. The first one consists in forgetting, the second one in remembering; the latter position is associated with Pius, the former with Rita.

Intruding into other lives, disclosing their private character and arbitrarily connecting them so as to arrive at an allegedly truthful story is presumptuous to Rita. She holds that no claim that it is possible to explain other people's lives is hubris, especially if one does not understand one's own. Insinuating that Pius is latently homosexual, Rita confronts Pius with a blank spot in his own biography. Her point is that not everything can/must be known about one's own life as well as about the lives of others. Rita advises Pius against prying into the lives of others and illustrates the lives of others. Kita advises Pius against prying into the lives of others and illustrates her point metaphorically: Rita accuses Pius' project of shallowness and, by implication, of speculation, when she maintains that his "history is surface" (P.297). The questionable epistemological value of Pius' history is underlined by the orientational metaphor of truth is depth. Because an essentialist, i.e. a solid and reliable account of past events is precluded by the very nature of representation, representations as such have become dubious.

Thus far from celebrating postmodern (sur)fiction, Rita's function is to criticize the methodological shortcomings of Pius' historiographical project. While Pius' access to the past is likened to vision, the semiotic value of the picture he is constructing of the past is limited according to Rita because the parts that the picture is made up of are in themselves pictures which are in themselves pictures again and so forth. As "each dot is infinity" (P.297), truth is never arrived at but deferred in an infinite regress. Drawing on chaos theory, Rita suggests that there is too much complexity in real life to be ever captured in representations. The logical conclusion for her is to dispense with representations altogether.
Pius’ position fundamentally differs from that of Rita. While the difference of the other is not necessarily impossible to overcome for Pius, for Rita is most certainly is. While Pius comes to believe in the truth of the poetic imagination, Rita condemns the imagination as speculation and as unethical because it intrudes into other people’s privacy and has the potential to harm. While Pius narrates a story, Rita argues for forgetfulness. Kita is influenced by Pipa whose attitude towards the diary changes from worship to burial, from voice to silence. For Rita, the project of giving voice is immoral and should be abandoned in favour of an ethics of silence. This ethics figures as an explicit rejection of story-telling: “Let it lie. this past. The diary and the stories that surround it arc mine now, to bury” (P.298). While Pius believes that the past should be represented (even if it cannot be fully known). Rita draws a diametrically opposed conclusion: "Of course the past matters, that is why we have to bury it sometimes. We have to forget to be able to start again" (P.298). Whereas Pius assumes that his archaeology of knowledge is benificial. Rita rejects the historiographical practice of uncovering/discovering and demands that the past be laid to rest. By way of metaphorical consistency it is indicated that for her the past should be removed as far as possible from the here and now (burial is forgetting. forgetting and burial are deep, deep is removed). To Rita’s mind, it is more important for those about to forge for themselves a new life to look towards the future and not into the past. Metaphorically, the new is approached from the outside, while the old should not be pried into.

Within the perspective of the novel, Pius’ position prevails over Rita’s. The past according to Pius should be represented because it can offer meaning: "And so I would construct a history, a living tapestry to join the past to present. to defy the blistering shimmering dusty bustle of city life outside which makes transients of the readers all”(P.8). The wish to oppose transience is a wish for transcendence; it reflects the desire to order the events in such a way as to shape possibilities of identification. History is to provide an anchoring in tradition and togetherness deemed indispensable in fighting alienation and isolation. In his opinion that an awareness of the past is crucial for coping with the present and the future, Pius is seconded by Sona. who testifies that he "has always railed – given the opportunity – against the lack of a
sense of history in us" (P.92), but also, for example, by Corbin who in the 1960s writes a memoir about his time in East Africa (P. 327).

While a majority of characters stress the necessity of representing the past, an interesting point in Vassanji’s novel is how exactly the past should be remembered. At the end of the The Book of Secrets Pius’ position is characterized by the insight into the limitations of his historiographical project. Making a case for a history of respect and dignity, he says:

What better homage to the past than to acknowledge it 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? (P.332).

As incompleteness and subjectivity inevitably shape representations, a possible solution lies, in a kind of account which makes use of the means of fiction. Apart from the insight into the epistemological doubts of research and writing that Vassanji reflects, the novel advocates the transformation of postmodern doubts and dilemmas in the process of narrativisation. Furthermore, paying homage to the past rather than fixing it dogmatically implies that the writing subject accepts the subjectivity of his story. If there is a 'truth' to be had from a history, it will be a subjective truth, a truth that depends on the writer's abilities, needs and perspective. Thirdly, paying homage to the past adequately also implies the idea of a history as an open text.

In other words, although Pius initially has a personal reason for writing his history, any historiographical work according to the novel’s perspective should be democratic in that it allows for various readings and interpretations. While it has been pointed out in the previous section that the writer of a diary establishes an idiosyncratic order, this holds also true for the respective reader. For Pius and his reconstruction of Corbin's diary the unity of the writing subject is eventually replaced by the unity of the reading subject. It goes without saying that the account of his
reading will, like all other so-called objective accounts, be a fiction. But the point is that it is a move legitimate one because it does not deny its fictional character. Moreover, because it is open to multiple interpretations, it subscribes to a pluralist attitude and thereby resists incorporation into a hegemonial master-discourse. Fourthly. historiography as homage to the past should not merely be democratic in that it allows for subjective readings. It also should be democratic in that it includes as many voices as possible. The pluralist vision of The Rook of Secrets emphasizes the importance of including voices that have not been represented previously. Giving voice to those hitherto marginalized has particular relevance to the postcolonial implications of the novel, and it is towards these that I will turn to in the following.

There is no denying that The Book of Secrets explores the intricacies of knowing. If it has been implied above that the body provides epistemological certainty to the person experiencing with his/her own body, this assumption requires qualification now. While Mariamu's body constitutes an instance of the unreadability of the Other for Pipa, the novel also raises the question whether the body truly enables a knowledge of the self. As Rita suggests at the end of the novel, Pius does not know himself and thus should not presume to know others/Others. Neglecting to take issue with the dialectic that Rita advocates for an epistemology of the Other, The Book of Secrets suggests that she is not completely mistaken in her judgement of Pius. The quality of the relationship between Pius and Gregory cannot be specified by Pius Fernandes when the remembers an evening at his friend'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. The sound of waves in the distance. An occasional car on the road outside. It was the next morning when I left; he was still in bed; fast asleep. (P.310).

While Pius remembers that both have "reconcilcd and touched" (P.311). he is not sure what to make of it. i.e. how to interpret the signs registered on his body:
"Was it because I was afraid of what more there was, or could have been? I honestly don't know" (P.311).

M.G. Vassanji's skepticism and distrust of conventional methods of 'knowing' is so pervasive that even the certainly granted by the body is questioned. In Pius' case the body cannot fill in all the gaps. A Freudian reading would have no trouble in identifying Corbin's behaviour as an instance of repression. In other words, while the body signals Pius that he finds Gregory attractive, the super-ego exerts its influence on Pius' faculty of reason so that morals and conventions (which Gregory does not have to pay attention to in the colonies) preclude giving in to the inclinations of the body. It is striking that the most important part of the account of his night with Gregory is missing, something which is indicated typographically by the text's paragraphing. Pius fades out the experience of the body and subconsciously veils the 'truth' about his sexual orientation to others but also, and this is crucial, to himself. Thus it is fitting that he should describe his relationship to Gregory as a "a long friendship that I could never quite explain" (P.233). While for the most part The Book of Secrets subscribes to the importance of the body as counter-discursive device in the context of a postcolonial writing back, ironically, in Pius' case it is mind over matter once again.

The analysis has thus come full circle, starting out with Pius' textual practice in his attempt are reconstructing Corbin's diary, the analysis has returned to the narrator of Vassanji's novel. His gender orientation allows the conclusion that his well-meaning interpolation of Corbin's diary cannot be exclusively explained by the affiliation of a colonial with a British colonial administrator. Both his national identification as well as his sexual inclination are not reflected upon. Possibly, Pius' political project of writing a postcolonial history is undermined by an identification which is of an entirely private nature. This, of course, would question a reading of Vassanji's novel as postcolonial in the conventional sense.

The key to an adequate understanding of The Book of Secrets is to realize that firmly anchored at the centre of Vassanji's narration is the insight into the importance of difference, which is the analytical paradigm that both postmodernism and
postcolonialism partake of. Both postmodernism and postcolonialism assume that difference is not only (i) an ontological but also (ii) an epistemological category.

(i) The postmodern emphasis on pluralism, originating from the insight into the ubiquity of difference, finds its application in postcolonialism with its stress on the counter-discursive. The postmodern ideas of tolerance and respect are reflected in a modified form in postcolonialism and its assertion of the subject's cultural/ethnic difference. Ontologically, the postmodern insight into the constructedness of the subject can, however, be problematic for postcolonial studies. While postmodernism denies any ontological essence, postcolonialism frequently relics on a strategic essentialism that posits the former other as the new self/subject. The rejection of any subject position, which postmodernism celebrates as a liberation, is liberating for postcolonialism only conditionally, i.e. only if the deconstruction of the subject concerns the former oppressor. The own subject position cannot be given up, otherwise colonialism's denigration of (native) voice would simply be continued. albeit by different means. Thus it seems safe to suggest that an activist postcolonial narrative could hardly be a full-fledged postmodern text. The Book of Secrets is postmodern in that Pius is not only critical of colonialism but also complicit with what he criticizes. His identification with Corbin precludes any reading of The Book of Secrets as activist. Moreover, in Pios Vassanji embodies postmodernism's lack of a theory of agency, which is a central concern for old-school postcolonialism.

(ii) Postmodern about The Book of Secrets is also its distrust of epistemologies. Vassanji is concerned with how to understand ethnicity. i.e. "human variation in terms of culture, tradition, language, social patterns and ancestry." While Vassanji suggests that to know an other might eventually be a futile endeavour, epistemological difficulties are enforced in The Book of Secrets insofar as they include the subject, too. Thus postcolonialism employs the postmodern attention paid to the different ways of known in other cultures as instances of resistance. Again, such a form of resistance is not unproblematic. By deconstructing their crippling image in the eyes of the Western world. many postcolonial writers have overlooked that
operating with a postmodern epistemological critique ultimately makes any epistemology questionable.

What about *The Book of Secrets* then the context of an analysis of discourses of difference? M.G. Vassanji seems to argue a case in favour of a postcolonial literature that has vistas to offer for the future as well as something to say about/against the past. Its deconstructive impetus has to be complemented by a constructive element; in other words, deconstruction must be understood as deconstruction. In order to arrive at some form of cultural assertiveness, Vassanji’s postcolonial literature, while implementing a critique of the colonial past, transforms its epistemological doubts. The impossibility of knowing, which, in a narratological level, rejects mimesis, draws on constructions, i.e. the means of poiesis, to make possible a more constructive treatment of past and present. From a postcolonial vantage point this means that the deconstruction of any history will have to be supplemented by the construction of stories. A radical critique of the old is insufficient, what is called for is also a new story. Hence the way out of the epistemological and ontological dilemmata lies in subscribing to the imagination. Although the other cannot be known objectively, attempts can and must be made to know him subjectively. Ethnography, women’s history, the history of the body, the writing of the nation, magic—all may and have to be narratvised.

It is in-between the affirmation of story-telling and post-structuralist doubts that *The Book of Secrets* oscillates between revealing and re-veiling. Although in general all difference in *The Book of Secrets* is irreducible, *The Book of Secrets* manages to narrate the irreducibility of difference and thus transforms it into something that can be understood. What can be known about object and subject is that not much can be known about them, if ‘knowledge’ translates an essentialist truths. Debunking the myth of essentialist truth/knowledge, stories constitute a way of bridging the gulf of difference in Vassanji’s novel without closing it. On a narratological level Vassanji thus argues a point he also arrived at in *No New Land*. Succinctly put, this point concerns the possibility as well as necessity of hybridity and cultural exchange.
The identity that M.G. Vassanji portrays for all his characters comes from the theory of discrimination. This theory is based on colour. But in The Book of Secrets the discrimination is tinged with staunch orthodoxy. The following passage in The Book of Secrets focuses the real feeling of the White for the people like Nurmohamed Pipa:

"The Indians are half savages". Mrs. Bailey observed, beginning an explanation she had obviously thought out conclusively and in detail. "And, therefore, worse", said her companion. "You can do nothing with them." "Gone too far the other way". she means. "At least the African you can mould. But the Indians and the Mussulman are incorrigible in their worst habits and superstitions. They will always remain so." (P. 91).

Nurmohamed Pipa is a typical case of racially migrant born in East Africa – though native; his alien origins make him simply impossible to belong to Africa. Pipa like his community in real life forever finds himself at the nexus between political discourse and identity formation. In other words, he can't define himself out with the racialised political and socio-historical backgrounds that nurse him. His estranged sense of being starts from the very early moments of his life. It is visible in the following excerpt from The Book of Secrets:

His name was Nurmohamed Pipa…Pipa was the nickname given to the family by the neighbourhood, and had stuck. It made him feel a lack of respectability, of a place that was truly home. He was simply an Indian, a mhindi, from Moshi, a town in the vicinity of Kilimanjaro whose masters were Germans. (P. 129).

Referring to Pipa's father and mother Vassanji mentions: He didn't know where he himself had been born and when. in any calendar. German. Arabic, or India. Of his father, he remembered only a tall thin man with a scraggly beard, a kindly grin
on his face as he pulled the boy's cheeks saying 'Dhaboo'. His father had not died... Nurmohamed Pipa could not recall grief, a graveyard. His father had gone away. and the boy carried this knowledge within him like a hidden deformity. He remembered him as Dhaboo, and for many years lived in the expectation that his father would return that one day when he came home from play Dhaboo would be there waiting... Of his mother, he remembered the long rains in the wet season falling through the cracks in the thatch roof. himself standing with her, shivering in a pool of water. his sister holding his hand. Another scene: squatting in the latrine with his mother, watching a fast and furious stream hit the ground under her and joining with his own wavering spurt. He looked in vain at her darkness for a member corresponding to his own. had had his arm smacked for pointing at that mysterious shadow... The boy was big and thicket, and nicknamed Pipa, meaning, 'barrel'. described him so well that it became exclusively his. Boys teased him by running fast and jeering, 'Pip...Pippip, Pipa!' (PP. 127-128).

In this rather inauspicious way, the readers are ushered into the worlds of Nurmohamed Pipa. From the passages mentioned above the readers can contrive two important details. Firstly, from the last description in the passage above we are invited to the denial of belonging that is to later emerge in the life of Pipa and other Asian African characters in a more apocalyptic manner at the end of M.G. Vassanji's The Book of Secrets. Secondly, the unfortunate origins of Pipa niark the difficult preliminary environment that bred early Asian Africans and gave them stimulus to forever quest for identity, belonging, home, development and security. In this context it is possible to read in this originary point of time of Nurmohamed Pipa’s life as the general conditions that inform the migratory sensibility in the Asian African psyche.

The origin of Nurmohamed Pipa makes the toughness of diasporic origins clear. It is central in M.G. Vassanji’s fictional world. The novelist is of the view that the early Asian Africans tried their best to come out from the conditions of deprivation, unhomeliness and insecurity but in vein. These conditions arc the ones that drove many an early migrant from India to Africa. These same conditions from the beginning point of self-definition when Mrs. Grant at the start of Vassanji’s first novel
The Gunny Sack challenges Salim Juma’s identity. In the originary moment of Nurmohamed Pipa’s life the readers thus notice the beginning of a narrative of location and dislocation. His early life develops nothing in the character of Pipa but the sense of estrangement.

Nurmohamed Pipa is treated as an unfortunate child in Moshi. He had inauspicious growing up without a father but with an immoral mother. His surly and burly nature marked him out for misfortune. It is these childhood events that loom large for him later in life and in the novel. Unfortunate circumstances appear as part and partial of his life. They follow him like a shadow. As a teenager he decides to abandon his so-called home. He serves as a porter. Moshi then becomes an imaginative location of origin, a site of dislocation. This tiny border town is an interstitial place between Kenya and Tanzania. It gives an interstitial mark on the life and identity of Nurmohamed Pipa.

With the depiction of Nurmohamed Pipa’s early life M.G. Vassanji prepares a strong base for a moving tale. This tale develops as a tragic tale of a man whose major sin was to be born a native of racially alien ancestry in East Africa. Vassanji does this by giving the readers the view that Nurmohamed is a person denied his place in the world or actually disowned by the very world that he lives in. Pipa is driven away from home due to lack of stability and security. He seems to emerge from a world that fantastically has already set a destiny for him. M.G. Vassanji sums up this: ... a burly youth with an angry glower for a world that did not want him. (P.128).

Here M. G Vassanji’s Nurmohamed Pipa becomes an extended metaphor. This extended metaphor clearly articulates the origins of Asian African migrant status at the margins.

The plot of The Rook of Secrets deals with Nurmohamed Pipa’s tragic mission of quest for a kind of belonging. In search of good fortunes Nurmohamed Pipa plunges from the borderland town Moshi into the other interstitial setting such as the coastal towns of Tanga and Dar es Salaam. In Tanga he gets an opportunity:
He found a job as a sweeper in the big hotel called Kaiserhop on the promenade. He would clean under the tables and chains after they had gone, sweeping away cigarettes stubs and crumbs, scraps of paper. On rare but not impossible occasions, they left something behind. One he returned a wallet not before removing one note from it, a modest one… And was rewarded… From this sweeper’s job he moved on to pulling a rickshaw rented from an Indian. (P.130).

Later in search of his development, Nurmohamed Pipa moves Dar es Salaam. There he engaged himself in a number of odd jobs for a few months. Due to his movement from one location to another, he has to face a lot of challenges. The most significant of them all is that he feels the need to belong, the need to identify with certain people, a certain place. Vassanji observes:

Dar es Salaam was all that he had been promised it would be… Her, surely, was opportunity; yet how was to go about finding it? Who was he in this town, who knew him? As he was to find out, you had to… be somebody. Of his savings only a little remained, and certainly not enough to go back home the way he had come. (P.151).

The sorrow and pain of Nurmohamed Pipa is that as a migrant he can never really belong. Underlying every action, thought and dreams in the life of Pipa, there seem to be ever rising hurdles, to be surmounted, making it really impossible to him to ever achieve the measure of comfort and security which he seeks. The breakout of such tensions and hurdles on the way to Pipa’s destination places the painful lesson that his past can’t be shed.

The passage mentioned below clearly, magnificently and suitably reflects the gloomy life of Nurmohamed Pipa:

Often the afternoon he would sit before the blindfolded camel that drove the mill as it walked perpetually in circles… Patient, doggedly persistent, in the illusion that it had a destination… And he would feel a surge of pity for it.
Where the beast thinks it was going...Did it see rewards at the end of its journey, did it hope to meet a mate, did it hope for happiness, children, old age? (P.132).

Here M.G. Vassanji clearly states that the journey undertaken by a migrant or a migrant community in search of identity, belonging, security and home in foreign locations is normally marred by challenges, doubts and never ending feelings of despair.

Solidarity is one of the important characteristics of diaspora. In The Book of Secrets it finds beautiful reflection and articulation. The readers know that the Shamsis are M.G. Vassanji’s fictional rendering of the Ismailis, a Muslim community that migrated to East Africa from the north west of India in the 19th century. The Shamsis, as they appear in The Book of Secrets, are tightly knit community with its own channels of communications. The close ties between its members are indicative of strong bonds of solidarity, which have also characterized the brotherhood of the Ismailis historically. The Shamsis endeavours to help and assist each other with material support or with finding suitable partners. A beautiful example in The Book of Secrets is Pipa who married to Mariamu.

The narrator of The Book of Secrets narrates how the Asian in East Africa have always been in an insecure position. They occupy a somewhat awkward position. However, from insecure and uncomfortable fate of Asians in East Africa deteriorates to untenable in 1970s. With the advent of nationalism the properties in the context of Tanzania's socialist phase, many members of the Shamsi community migrate once more. It finds its clear reflection in The Book of Secrets. Every major character of this novel migrates at least once. Pipa who was born in Moshi moves between Moshi, Tanga, Dares Salaam and Kilkono. He migrates to escape insecurity, shame and poverty.

To Sum up, the futility of the desire of historian-detective Pius and that of spies like Maynard to probe into secrets and to disclose truths has philosophical repercussions. In the context of postmodernism’s questioning of epistemologies, truth
as such has become a problematic concept. Totalising claims as to the truth-value of unifying master narratives are discredited, and objectivity is no longer a given. Instead, the petit recits. the local and private histories are moved to the centre of critical attention, and those marginalized and discriminated against are endowed with a voice. Histories are no longer regarded as flawed only because they are inflected by a particular gender position, or discredited because they focus on a small ethnic community. Instead, representations of the hitherto neglected Other are celebrated. An attempt is made to see the other in his/her own right and no longer instrumentalise him/her for the construction of a monolithic metropolitan, patriarchal, capitalist identity. This essentially postmodern enterprise of rehabilitating difference accepts the dilemma of representation. i.e. the impossibility of ever capturing the "real thing" in any kind of sign system.

Nurmohamed Pipa, a metonym of Asian African community, is not only a restless character but also a homeless one. It is a deep sense of unhomliness that makes the forefathers of Asian Africans such as Dhanji Govindji in The Gunny Suck to migrate from the borderlands of Cutch, Kathiawar and Pubjab. It is the same deep sense of unhomliness that drives Nurmohamed Pipa away from his borderland birthplace of Moshi in search of comfort, home and security. It is still the same deep sense of unhomliness that drives scores of post-Pipa generations of Asian Africans from the borderland that is postcolonial East Africa. East Africa is a borderland, a world in-between India and the new Asian African homelands in North America and Western Europe. The similitude of the unhomliness of the characters in the novels, and in the actual circumstances that led Vassanji to self-exile out of East Africa, is a uniting. Bond. This bond makes the narrative of his stories credible account of the experience of his community.

In The Book of Secrets Nurmohamed Pipa can be seen struggling for home. He feels compelled to run away from spaces that stand in the way of his desire for homely life. This is why Pius Fernandes expresses his view:

Pipa was home now, yet lived in fear. He was a marked man, known both the agents of Maynard and the allies of
Germans; any of them could call on him as they had done in Kilkoni. (P.200).

This illustrated feeling of unhomeliness that Nurmohanied Pipa feels after his interstitial experience of the First World War later becomes the hallmark of his state of being as well. No matter where he goes or what he does, he never gets comfort or feels at home. It is for this reason that he rents a house with a shop front in Dar and that's how the famous Pipa begins anew. Soon after the devastating war and the losses that he incurs. Pipa finds it essential to move back home and revise his life. But his home like that of many other Asian Africans throughout the novel is quite unhomely and as soon as he reaches Moshi, he is again in search of homely space:

Me had grown to love his wife [before she was raped then murdered by some unknown assailants]. He felt cheated, felt her memory somehow violated by the quick resolution in the matter of her murder. But his elders had ruled; and there was no other authority.... Save the military, which he feared.... To which he could turn. The town of Kikono now held for him the bitter reminder of a happy beginning cut short. Within days, as soon as the British armies had finally broken into German East Africa. Pipa set off from his hometown of Mochi. (P.200).

Here the readers are brought to share in the pains and searching for homes and the pains of losing these homes. Pipa’s tragic identity as a racially migrant in a changing East Africa is beyond his control. So is his interstitial sense, which is interpreted by the postcolonial government as ‘fence sitting’ leads him to that abyss of dispossession as he loses all his wealth in the nativist Africanisation programmes of the 1960s. Finally, with all strength, youth and vigour spent on a null and void journey. Pipa succumbs to the pressure of his diasporic identity as an Asian African in East Africa and dies. He dies the very same day the socialist government of Tanzania nationalizes its (rental) properties.
Memory is also an important characteristic of diaspora. This characteristic has a significant place in *The Book of Secrets*. The world of memories has always been the germ of Vassanji’s fiction. The author’s engagement with the past and heritage through memory is very significant. The past according to Pius Fernandes should be represented because it can offer meaning.

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 all. (P.18).

For Pius Fernandes, the narrator, the past is an aesthetic necessity; it has great sacral heuristic value: Of course the past matters. that’s why we need to bury it sometimes. We have to forget to able to start again. (P.298).

In *The Book of Secrets* memory negotiates the colonial and postcolonial history of East Africa to underscore its contradictions and contingencies. Throughout the novel the history of the struggle of imperial powers of Europe like Germany and England over colonies in Africa, the World Wars, their impact on the Indian diaspora in the African East Coast, and finally we decolonization of Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda. Zanzibar and other nations constitute the troublesome destiny of the people. They are forced to migrate and re-migrate to the place both imaginary and real.

Stuart Hall, in "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," reminds that the old, imperialist and hegemonic definition of diaspora refers "to those scattered tribes whose identity can only be secured in relation to some sacred homeland to which they must at all costs return, even if it means pushing other people into the sea" (P. 244). Hall goes on to describe the diasporic experience as marked by difference, transformation, and hybridity, and he challenges the reader to conceptualize diaspora in a manner that does not depend upon the centrality of the homeland. At the same time, one must not erase distinctions between various forms of transnational mobility and displacement. While diasporic and immigrant experiences can be similar, they are not necessarily interchangeable; not all immigrants are members of diasporic
communities, and not all members of diasporic communities are immigrants. In order to be identified as a diaspora, at least one outside force—such as imperial power, colonial authority, natural catastrophe or economic, social or political upheaval—must be present. M.G. Vassanji is an author whose fiction illustrates this difference between immigration and diaspora by focusing on characters, like Mariamu in The Book of Secrets, who exist on the margins of Shamsi society and show how the Shamsis’ ethnic identity, while enduring in the diaspora, becomes transformed as it comes into contact with other ethnicities and cultures.

In this third novel, The Book of Secrets (1994), Vassanji’s multigenerational narrative spans seventy-five years and three generations. The narrator, Pius Fernandes, uses the 1913 diary of a farmer British Assistant District Commissioner (ADC) to reconstruct the history of the Shamsi community in Kikono, a fictional town near the border of Tanganyika and British East Africa. Thus, the readers get overlapping perspectives presented to the readers in the first half of the novel, which do not depict the original homeland as a defining feature of Shamsi identity. Instead, the novel exemplifies what Mary Louise Pratt calls contact zones: “the space of colonial encounters, the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations” (P.6). While focusing on Mariamu, I will argue that the Shanisis’ diasporic identity is constituted not through its relationship to a homeland, but rather through its continual interactions with other identities around them. If Kikono is, as I argue it is, a “contact zone,” then what determines Shamsi identity in this novel is not a remembered or reconstructed origin but how origins dissolve when a character resides on various socio-cultural borders.

The first half of The Book of Secrets makes it abundantly clear that socio-cultural borders and their negotiation determine the characters’ lives. This part of the narrative focuses on Mariamu, one of the novel’s key figures. He uncle is the Sounder of Kikono and mukhi of the local Shamsi community, which would suggest that she might have a special status in the community; nevertheless, though a Shanisi and related to the local leader, she resides on the periphery of the community. Mariamu’s
physical attributes differentiate her from the other women in Kikono. She is taller, thinner, fairer, with a "long oval face, the chin and cheekbones, the long nose-not the round features of the shopkeepers' wives" (P.104). Her mother's apparently disastrous remarriage to Rashid is one reason why Mariamu is on the periphery of the Shamsi community. Her behaviour, as I shall mention later, is atypical: she does not act in a manner ascribed to her by the gendered Shamsi community at key points in the novel. And the family's social status is yet another factor that makes Mariamu a marginal figure. Her stepfather is "a former railway coolie (therefore strictly speaking not one of the Shamsis)" (P.50). Thus, a socio-cultural border between Shamsi and non-Shamsi appears within Mariamu's family. As a "daughter of the community," she is entitled to membership (P.70), but community membership encompasses more than just religious belief and practice; it is associated with a non-nostalgic relationship to the homeland. Although Mariamu's stepfather is a "Shamsi" character in Kikono who longs to return to India, the other Shamsi characters in the novel do not. Instead, they are intent on negotiating their ethnic particularities with various groups around them.

It is clear then that M.G. Vassanji's novel presents the readers with a form of diasporic identity that is not dependent upon homeland. The Shamsis, to borrow Stuart Halls' words, "constantly produce and reproduce themselves anew, through transformation and difference" (P.244). And these transformations and differences appear along various socio-cultural borders of the community, especially those of religion, race, ethnicity, gender, language, social status and class. Socio-cultural borders are, to a certain degree, unfixed since they relate to ethnicity and ethnic identity. Rey Chow writes that "[e]thnicity signifies the social experience which is not completed once and for all but which is constituted by a continual, often conflictual, working-out of its grounds" (Writing Diaspora: Tactics of Intervention in Contemporary Cultural Studies, P.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. Without them, ethnic differences would be erased as the larger population in the host region subsumes the diasporic community.
At this point, it must be noted that, in Vassanji’s writing, the Shamsis are a fictional group. In the “Author’s Note” that accompanies The Gunny Suck, Vassanji states that “[t]he Shamsi community is fictions” (P.iv). It is, however, modeled on a real community, the Khoja Ismailis. Moreover, despite Vassanji’s claim that the Shamsis in his book are fictional, there is a group with that name—though there is no evidence that the real Shamsis migrated from the regions where they live. As Farhad Daftary notes, “[t]he Nizari community of the Shamsis, who now acknowledge the Agha Khan and lives as goldsmiths chiefly in Multan and elsewhere in Panjeh, claim to have been converted to Nizari Isma‘ilism by Pir Shams al-Din” (P.478-479). Pir Shams al-Din is an important figure in Ismaili history because the converted many Hindus to Isma‘ilism in the fourteenth century. In The Gunny Suck, Vassanji associates the origin of the Shamsis to a different individual: “[h]is name was Shamas, and they called themselves Shamsis” (P.7). The fictional Shamsis in Vassanji’s fiction come from Junapur, a town in Gujarat, one of the regions from which the Khojas migrated. Nevertheless, the diasporic trajectories and relationships to the homeland are similar for both the fictional Shamsis and the real Khojas:

Khoja Ismailis Muslim diasporic communities in East Africa, the Caribbean, and North America that emigrated under the leadership of Aga Khan III in the nineteenth century from Kutch, Sindh, Katiawar, and Gujarat do not necessarily accord much importance to connections with South Asia, making questions of looking back to India as a homeland irrelevant, or at best inappropriate. (Braziel, Jana Evans and Anita Mannur, P. 9).

Key differences between the Khoja Ismailis and their fictional counterparts are the leadership of Aga Khan III and the Khoja Ismailis’ active involvement in the building of the British Empire. Vassanji states, “[i]f I were to write about a real religious group, then my dates would have to be exactly right” (Rhodes. “Interview”, P.117); however, if he did that, then his characters’ relationship to the British Empire and its representatives would change. The ambivalence the characters feel toward the
British during the war would not be realistic because the Aga Khan sided with the British and urged "his followers to aid the British authorities in their territories" (Daftary, P.521). Instead, Vassanji is able to dramatize the way "subjects are constituted in and by their relations to each other" by positioning the Shamsis in a contact zone and conceptualizing their diasporic experiences. He does this by placing Mariamu, a key figure in the Shamsi community, in a marginal position. Mariamu moves from "daughter of the community" to outcast and back and, and by doing so, she embodies the community's social and cultural boundaries. By examining the strategies Vassanji uses to characterize Mariamu, one can hope to demonstrate the ways diasporic identity is defined in relation to socio-cultural borders as they are presented in The Book of Secrets.

Mariamu in Relation to Colonial Authority and the Shamsis a crowd gathers as Alfred Corbin, the new colonial administrator assigned to Kikono, approaches the town: “[t]he Indians formed a straighter line. the Swahilis stirred” (P.28). The differences between the various ethnic groups in Kikoni dramatize how this town is marked by socio-cultural borders. Kikono, a small town near the borders of the German Tanganyika colony and British East Africa, contains two distinct groups of Asians, the Shamsis "in white drill suits and red or black fezzes," and other Asians in "dhotis and turbans" (P.26). Among the Africans, the narrator identifies the Swahilis. "In kanzus and embroidered caps," local tribesmen and women and servants and labourers (P.26). Thus, Kikono society is stratified. The British are the colonial masters while the Africans are at the bottom, and the Asians occupy the middle-class position. Shane Rhodes, in his essay on The Book of Secrets, writes:

[F]rom the star; 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 heterogenous society) of relations between the British whites, "immigrant" Indians, and indigenous blacks. ("Frontier Fiction", P.182).
The apparently pluralistic appearance of the town, however, is actually a product of British colonialism: “[b]y its very structure, colonialism is regionalist and separatist. Colonialism does not simply state the existence of tribes; it also reinforces and separates them”. Thus, the straighter line that the Indians form reflects their complicity with and dependence upon the colonial system. In other words, the Indians have a stake in impressing Corbin. In contrast, the stirring of the Swahilis reflects their unease and represents a form of resistance to the ceremonial displays and the pomp and pageantry so often associated with the British Empire.

Dress and behaviour during Corbin's arrival mark the socio-cultural boundaries between African and Asian. Swahili and Shamsi. Mariamu appears in this scene, but she hovers on the edge of the crowd as a ghostly figure who attracts Corbin's attention. Pius Fernandes does not name this figure when she first appears; however, other descriptions of this character's appearance and behavior coincide with her description. Nevertheless, when she appears, Pius Fernandes's narrative perspective shifts from that of a distant and detached observer to one that sees through Alfred Corbin's eyes. He reports:

[T]his was what appeared to the new ADC as he approached the town: fleeting glimpses caught between bush and tree and anthill-a figure draped in white, dashing from left to right, cutting across his path in the distance. It could have been a man in kanzu but for the black hair flying, the lithe movement, the nimble step ... then a red head-cover over the hair to complete the female figure. So amazed was he by the sight that he had stopped to watch. She disappeared behind an incline, where he was told lay the settlement. (P.28).

This passage is constructed through a rhetorical strategy of ambivalence: anthills, bushes and trees as well as lithe and nimble movement obscure the figure, leaving Corbin with only fleeting glimpses of the woman, and he cannot be certain about what or whom he sees; the figure could be male or female, African or Asian,
human or as Corbin notes in his diary "an apparition" (P.29). Ambivalence reinforces the perception that socio-cultural borders are fluid; furthermore, the description of Mariamu as an apparition is significant because it not only alludes to the shetani that appear later on, but it also identifies her as a figure capable of flaunting the Shamsis’s preconceived gender roles; she does what no other woman does and moves about in the background, haunting Corbin. Moreover, this scene invests her with agency, marks her as one capable of crossing the socio-cultural borders that separate the Shamsis from other ethnic groups in Kikono precisely because the apparition represents the unconstrained the supplemental, the excessive. it is always already at the edge of socio-cultural borders.

To return for a moment to the scene cited earlier, Corbin approaching Kikono, the figure that he sees could be a man in kanzu, a white cotton smock usually worn by Africans, suggesting the blurring of ethnic distinctions. The type of clothing mentioned suggests that Mariamu’s representation will also blur the distinctions between Swahili and Indian. In fact, her behavior is closer to that of the Swahilis than to that of the Indians. As The readers have seen, the Indian townspeople are orderly; they have lined themselves up on the edge of the road. The Swahilis, however, are part of the crowd but are not as orderly. Like the Swahilis, Mariamu represents motion with the potential to disturb what is considered normative in this community. Thus, Vassanji creates subtle distinctions among three groups: the European, the Swahili, and the Indian. At the same time, he indicates that the Indians are not a homogenous group. One of Alfred Corbin’s diary entries unpacks the Indian category: “[r]oughly half the Indians belong to the Shamsi sect of Islam and have a separate mosque. [...] There are also Hindu, Punjabi, and Memon families. but quite often the distinction blurs” (P.35). The socio-cultural borders that separate these Indian communities do not signify either pure otherness or heterogeneity. By representing Kikono as a contact zone, Vassanji challenges the conventional notion that diasporic communities are cohesive. Corbin’s understanding and interpretation of Kikono’s non-cohesiveness reinforces the ambivalence that blurred distinctions or hazy socio-cultural borders create. For example, he does not mention that there are separate mosques for the Sunni Swahilis and the Shi’a Shamsis; nonetheless, he recognizes a
religious dimension to the socio-cultural borders drawn between the Shamsis and the other communities in Kikono.

Mariamu inhabits various socio-cultural borders by separating herself from Corbin and the townspeople, and other passages in the novel further emphasize this perception: "there was a wild look about her" (P.48). and “[t]he girl is wild[...]. She’s inclined to go away by herself and the family is worried” (P.50). Wildness represents the unconstrained and excessive. In relation to the paradigm of British colonialism, wildness would also characterize the uncivilized and savage, which Mariamu embodies through her tendency to move away from community. Her family, however, want to constrain her behavior and see her brought back into the fold. While the agent of the family’s control over her is her stepfather Rashid, who spies on her stepfather Rashid, who spite on her when she is working as Corbin’s housekeeper and living his house, the agent of the community's control is Mariamu’s uncle Jamali, the founder and mukhi of Kikono, who exercises social control through the institution of marriage.

The mukhi betroths Mariamu to Pipa, a recent convert and merchant from the nearby town on the German side of the border. The mukhi says, “[Pipa], too, has problems, but inshallah. God willing, they can give happiness to each other” (P.51). The logic behind the mukhi’s comment indicates that the institution of marriage would normalize Mariamu and Pipa. Marriage will control Mariamu's wildness, while making Pipa less of an outsider by diminishing his status as a recent convert and "former street urchin, without even dignity of a father's name to attach to his" (P.104). Because marriage brings individuals, families and, to a lesser extent, communities together. it is employed as a means of establishing affiliations. Thus Pipa’s and Mariamu’s marriage promises to change their status within the community: they are “[t]wo people with incomplete, lowly origins-orphans, really. They had to make it. together. Together, they were inviolable. They had respectability. were a family” (P.106). In other words, the respectability associated with families entitles two individuals. both of whom are fatherless, to full membership in a patriarchal Shamsi society.
Mariamu’s wedding is not an exclusively Shamsi affair: “[a]ll sat on the floor facing the mukhi, except the ADC, who stood in the doorway. He knew he was not allowed in, yet he watched with obstinacy they did not know how to handle” (P.85). This scene unfolds through rhetoric of inversion: this time it is Corbin and not Mariamu who is obstinate and behaving inappropriately by watching a ceremony he should not be allowed to witness: it is Corbin who marks the socio-cultural border that prohibits foreigners from entering the mosque and witnessing the Shamsis’ rituals. The readers should also acknowledge that Corbin’s position as a colonial administrator makes him impossible to handle. Usually, Mariamu behaves in a manner that not only differentiates her from Alfred Corbin but also reinforces socio-cultural borders that separate the Shamsis from others. During her wedding ceremony, however, it is difficult for her to exist as a peripheral figure when the community’s attention centres on her.

Therefore, she becomes a figure who marks the socio-cultural boundaries because she not only exists on the periphery of the community but also appears to remarkably unlike the other Shamsi women: “[h]er features were markedly distinct from the other women’s, so that she seemed an outsider of some sort: tall and thin, fair, with long face, pronounced nose, full lips” (P.43). Physical appearance, however, is not the only thing that separates Mariamu from the other Shamsi women. She moves from the margins to the centre of the community at a dance during a festival where the women "enacted the first conversations of the community from Hinduism, several centuries ago in Gujarat" (P.42). The origins of the Shamsis survive through ritual, and Corbin watches Mariamu perform in it:

The circle of women had broken, a few of the younger ones were dancing solo, and in between them danced this siren.
The tabalchi-drummer beat faster and the agile dancers kept time. feet thumping, hips gyrating without inhibition, breath drawn sharply, faces glistening with sweat. (P.43).

This scene entangles the exotic and the erotic, and deploys the rhetoric of seduction. The sensual imagery and the word "siren" associate Mariamu and this
scene with the desire to cross or lure another across this socio-cultural border. I should point out that socio-cultural borders not only define and separate communities and groups, but can also be sites of connection and conversion. Moreover, Mariamu's appearance recalls Corbin's first sighting of her: on both occasions she wears the white frock and red pachedi. Pius Fernandes depicts Corbin in this scene as weary and almost feverish, thus maintaining the rhetoric of seduction: Corbin closes his eyes, holds a "cold sherbet glass to his forehead." and "when he opened his eyes again it was if he had been transported, was in the midst of a vision" (P.43). Mariamu's exaggerated performance leads to the eventual exclusion of Corbin from the Shamsi festival because the mukhi intervenes, defends the socio-cultural border that separates the Shamsi community from others, and prevents Mariamu from crossing it.

In the scene above, the mukhi also prevents Mariamu from seducing Corbin. There is, however, some uncertainty in the novel as to whether or not Mariamu crosses this border and has a sexual relationship with Corbin: the novel contains one "bedroom scene" with these two characters, but there is nothing intensely sexual or erotic about it. Corbin just becomes "conscious of a cool sensation, hot aching eyeballs, the smell, the weight on the bed of another body. Mariamu was putting compresses on his forehead" (P. 82). Furthermore, the erotic images that appeared in the scene in which Mariamu dances for Corbin are absent in this instance. Fever and illness displace dancing and seduction. In this context, however, illness becomes a metaphor for the pathology of colonialism, thus turning Corbin into a "yellow ghost of himself" (P.82). The word 'ghost' is significant as well since it links Mariamu and Corbin; both characters are ghost-like figures, apparitions when they appear to cross these socio-cultural borders.

Mariamu is also identified as a character who crosses the socio-cultural border between public and private. The Shamsis expect to see a blood-stained bed sheet displayed from the newlyweds' home, which would provide evidence of the consummation of that relationship. Evidence of sexual activity, a private and intimate event, is publicized. But on the wedding night, Pipa discovers that his bride has already had sexual intercourse. A few days after the wedding, Pipa realizes that "he
could have kept his shame a secret between these four walls; but instead he had announced it from the rooftops” (P.107). For some reason and here the text is not explicit-Mariamu's stepfather, Rashid, either knows or suspects that there was an affair between Mariamu and Corbin: “[i]t was the mzungu who deflowered the girl” (P. 106). Pipa’s outburst validates the rumor and makes the accusation more believable. Therefore, Mariamu ends up near the periphery of the Shamsi community again, and if Pipa chooses to reject her, then “[s]he would fend for herself, become somebody's woman, a prostitute” (P. 106).

_The Book of Secrets_ is a novel centered around the discovery of a stolen diary. Containing the impressions Alfred Corbin, the journal, which traces his arrival and early years in Africa, is framed within the larger context of the research of Pius Fernandes, a retired history teacher. In his interview with Fisher, Vassanji states, "When I write about the past, the present always matters-who's telling the story, from what perspective, how much can you really know about the past, the ambiguity and contradictions and the subjectivity of history and memory ... it's not someone standing outside it, an omniscient narrator". Commencing with an extract from Piu's own diary, the novel focuses not only on multiple narrative strands to demonstrate the simultaneous potential and limitations of stories and the enduring significance, but also the contradictory fragility, of memory; the uses and abuses of history in the complex interplay between individuals, communities and nations. _ (M.G. Vassanji’s interview with Fisher)._

In seeking to understand the ways in which the modern present has been articulated within the context of the hegemonising global imperative that is Occidental modernity, Young argues for the relevance of colonial discourse analysis, which, far from being "a specialized activity only for minorities or for historians of imperialism and colonialism ... itself forms the point of questioning of Western knowledge's categories and assumptions" (White Mythologies, P. 43): for “humanism itself, often validated amongst the highest value of European civilization, was dcepty complicit with the violent negativity of colonialism, and played a crucial part in its ideology” (P.160). The novel describes how Corbin can feel his "soul ... stirring" as
he pictures himself "finally 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" (P.23). Shortly after disembarking, Corbin finds his opposite in the character of Frank Maynard (P.18), embodies "[t]he unapologetically violent enforcement of imperialism" (Toron, P.3). The novel introduces a tension between the rhetoric and the reality of colonial rule through the character of Maynard. whose brutality and savagery reveal the contradictions inherent in the colonial enterprise. In addressing himself to Corbin, Maynard makes a number of contradictory and confused statements that combine ideas of the essential nature of Africa, taking the land as metonym for its people, even as he parrots romanticized Enlightenment notions of the noble savage, an idea that tunes into the concept of the universal man. suggested when he tells Corbin. "I respect the African-as a redoubtable enemy or as a friend" (P.20).

Maynard then ends off by reinstating the binary hierarchy which validates colonial rule when he tells Corbin that "the white man. ... authority, ... order-they are the same thing here" (P.21). That Corbin “disapprove[s] of his actions, not of the man” (P.22) suggests that Corbin and Maynard merely represent the two faces of the coin that is colonialism. In the “Governor’s Memoranda for PC’s and DC’s ... [on] Native Policy” (P.31), the text shows how, by imagining an Africa mired in the dark timelessness of primitivity, Britain finds in its representation of its racial ‘other’ a reflection of itself as the self-proclaimed bearer of light. Preceded by the guiding lamp of Enlightenment rationality, which brings with it "a high stage of civilization" and is attended by the values of "manliness, self-respect, and honest dealing”, the "higher ideals of morality and justice”, the British Empire, "with its experience of ruling other lands and with its human system”, becomes justified as "the best nurturing ground for an emerging nation. for backward Africans and Orientals to enter the society of civilized people".

Informed by a seemingly transcendental reason and grounded in the universalizing logic of empirical observation, narratives of Western imperial history often seek to justify colonialism by framing it as a process that allowed for the
unilateral transmission of modernity, civilization and culture to the 'undeveloped' societies of the colonized. However, it was "during the middle years of the nineteenth century, with the abolition of the Atlantic slave trade, [that] attention shifted to the possibility of appropriating the vast resources of the continent itself: this second phase brought the moment of colonialism proper, culminating in the 'scramble for Africa' of the 1880s" (P.259). Not only was modernity with its Enlightenment values of humanism and rationalism employed as justification for colonialism, via the exaltation of a hierarchical trajectory of development placing European culture at the pinnacle of civilization and "a scientific racism" that justified colonization in the name of a civilizational superiority. It was Empire's "capitalist search for higher profits from colonial conquest" (Mudimbe, P.2), its economic exploitation of the colonies, and the subsequent wealth of the metropole that enable Europe's transition into modernity.

Corbin retrospectively summarises the endeavours of Empire as "a chapter of world history ... therewith ... closed. We went with the best of intentions" (P.329). Yet, as suggested by the novel, colonialism is not quite 'past', nor is Empire dead, for the changes brought by the project of Western imperialism continue to reverberate through time and manifest themselves within the present. Vassanji makes this point clear within the novel through the recurrence of dreams of "imperial nostalgia, as a way of restaging its lost identity" (Cikandi. Maps of Englishness, P.21); these dreams are evinced by Corbin's consultation "with the BBC on a drama titled 'The Barons of Uasin Gishu,' based on the lives of the white aristocratic settlers of Kenya. It ... brings (somewhat wistfully) Old England and the Empire to the American republic" (The Book of Secrets, P.330). Pointing strongly to the ways in which colonialism under Europe has merely given way to cultural, political, and economic neo-imperialism under America. Therefore, the question of "[w]hat is history, sir?" (P.4) that Feroz poses to Fernandes is one asked by the novel in earnest, bringing to our attention the necessity for an inquiry into what Corbin distinguishes as a closed chapter of 'world history'. For history—or, more accurately, historicism as a practice—is not a means of gaining direct access to the past so much as it is "the testimony of what is: as knowledge. discourse, debate, representation, interpretation"
Put differently, the writing of history is a project deeply invested in the establishment of the present, which constitutes itself in terms of what it knows—or acknowledges—of what came before.

Keeping this in view, Said’s recognition of the Occident’s “homogenizing and incorporating world historical scheme that assimilated non-synchronous developments, histories, cultures, and peoples to it” (P.210) generates an awareness of how world history, being a euphemism for Western history, has installed within the present a knowledge of the world’s historical past as emanating from Europe; in other words, a sense of history (and thus a sense of the reality the readers inhabit) that privileges the arc of the development of Western civilization, even as it conceals its partiality beneath the universalizing language of Enlightenment rationalism, wherein “historical truth lies not in the languages that provide the readers with our sense of inhabiting and making sense of the world but elsewhere, in the ‘facts’ and ‘truth’ revealed by reason” (Chambers, Culture After Humanism, P.12).

Therefore, Corbin’s words reveal his disavowal of a far more complex and traumatic past, of “numerous scars on the land” (P.190) that cannot be effaced simply by an assertion of good intentions, a fact reinforced by the novel’s depiction of how present sites continue to be haunted by a past that cannot be laid to rest. Vassanji repeatedly draws the reader’s attention to the presence or presence of a ghostly past that continues to inhabit or creep into the spaces of the here and how, demonstrated by how the diary, containing a hitherto undiscovered history, is unearthed from the storeroom of Fernandes’s former student, Feroz, in turn described as “that famous backroom of Pipa’s day, thought then to harbour in its darkness all kinds of mysteries and evidence of shady dealing which the police could never lay their hands on. Now it was a bright fluorescent-lighted room” (P.4).

McClintock writes, “Imperialism is not something that happened elsewhere—a disagreeable fact of history external to Western identity. Rather, imperialism and the invention of race were fundamental aspects of Western, industrial modernity” and neocolonial and neoimperial inequalities continue to persist between developed nations and the ‘third-world’. The assumption of what Walter Benjamin terms the
“homogeneous, empty time” (P.261) of modernity is in fact riddled with discontinuous modernities, rendering the ostensible universality of historicism’s claims of progress and development deeply suspect. Rather, "by bringing non-Western territory into the capitalist world, colonialism established a global order centred around Europe, which developed "at the expense of other parts, either by trade or by the transfer of surpluses." Beyond the economic inequalities engendered by a system of exploitation that not only diverted material resources, but also destroyed traditional knowledges related to agriculture and crafts. Mudimbe goes on to outline the epistemic toll taken by the colonial enterprise, which brought about the disintegration of African social, cultural and religious arrangements through the imposition of its institutions and its ideologies (P.4). Subsequently, to uncover the influence of historical narratives over our lives is to expose "the link between the structures of knowledge and the forms of oppression of the last two hundred years: a phenomenon that has become known as Eurocentrism" (White Mythologies, P.33), which is "premised on a universal identity that, nevertheless, was predicated on systematic modes of exclusion". Post-colonial theory, then, performs the necessary task of turning a self-reflexive eye towards the problems and contradictions inherent within the global narrative of modernity, as well as in the narratives comprising the categories of identity and knowledge that the readers all inhabit, for, as Gikandi makes clear, "the epistemic gestures through which Europe came to be constituted as a universal force must, given its ‘real-live’ consequences, be read as political" (P.6).

As a text that self-consciously foregrounds and investigates the possibilities of its own artificiality, The Book of Secrets draws attention to the fact that there is nothing natural or neutral in the manner through which meaning is assembled; as White reminds us, "by a specific arrangement of the events reported in the documents, and without offense to the truth value of the facts selected, a given sequence of events can be emplotted in a number of different ways". Significantly, it is a diary that Vassanji chooses for his central metaphor: a book that contains secrets of a personal nature, but also a book of English words that "insignia of colonial authority and a signifier of colonial desire and discipline" (Bhabha. P.102), which conceals a secret—namely, the myth of “conquest and its civilizational authority ... the imperial
mythology promoted by the colonial textbook”. In the novel, Vassanji turns our focus towards Corbin’s diary. a ”1913 edition … of the ‘Explorer’ variety, which could be used for the following year, presumably by those confined to those regions of the globe with limited access to amenities…The endpapers were covered with advertisements of the day … There followed … postal rates to South Africa; cable rates, and 1913 custom tariffs to South Africa” (P.6). In so doing, he supplies the readers with details that underscore the historicity of the object. alerting the reader to the ways in which the diary is ringed about and literally inscribed upon by the logistics of colonial enterprise: the diary, in other words, is a cultural artifact that points to the historicity of the West itself. By pinpointing the emergence of ”Enlightenment and European humanism” (Chambers, Culture After Humanism P.25) from within a specific time and space. Vassanji lays bare the cultural coordinates and origins of the ostensibly universal values that are valorized by and which simultaneously undergird colonialism-and which, it must be noted here, are championed also by Fernandes. the self-identified historian and “humanist” narrator of the novel, who it as much a product of his situation as the objects of his study (Vassanji, The Book of Secrets p.238). Through its emphasis on “the historically conditioned character of the historical discipline” (White, “The Burden of History” P.113), the novel frames the writing of history as a cultural practice through which meaning is created and transmitted, thus bringing the reader into an ”ethnography in which the ‘man’ of knowledge, the scientist, the subject, becomes the object of a discourse. of a history, of a world, of an ontological space that is interrogated and interrogating” (Chambers, Culture After Humanism P.25).

Vassanji seeks to address the troubled authority of imperial narrative by brightening the fictionality of British colonial identity itself, which constructs itself through ”a structure of binary oppositions” (Ashcroft, On Post-Colonial Futures P.112). The honk of secrets. which captures and subsequently controls the spirits contained within its pages. emblemetises how. “through the writing of the colonial landscape and its subjects, the provincial concerns of several European countries assumed a universal normativity” (Gikandi, Maps of Englishness P.6). The clear divide between inside and outside becomes undermined, however, when the text goes
on to suggest the impossibility of locating a position beyond the temporal and spatial coordinates from which the 'universal' man emerges. This is evinced by the novel’s description of how the “mzungu first and foremost captured himself in his bottle-book; and long after it left his side-taking part of him with it-it continued to capture other souls and their secrets. and to dictate its will upon them" (The Book of Secrets, PP. 1-2).

Not only does the bottle-book, this signifier of colonial authority, work its will upon the "captured spirits" (P.1) within its discourse. it also subjects its author to the same. suggesting the fundamental role that “history, language and culture [play] in the construction of subjectivity and identity" (S. Hall, "New Ethnicities", P.201). In his analysis of the “denial of oneness", Fabian describes the manner in which adjectives such as “mythical, ritual, or even tribal” are employed to “connote temporal distancing as a way of creating the objects or referents of anthropological discourse. To use an extreme formulation: temporal distanced is objectivity” (PP.30-31). Put simply, the historical progress of British civilization is implicitly measured against the timeless primitivity of its racial ‘others’ whose pasts are devalued by being framed as ‘myth’, and which are assumed to exist in a time before Time. However, the novel’s reference to "a Latin inscription [in the dairy]: 'at nosh inc …' the rest was stained and illegible" (The Rook of Secrets, P.6) underscores the fragile and mythical core of British imperial identity, which drew upon the wealth of Roman literature (itself beholden to Greek culture), not only to enrich its own. but also to construct a narrative—a trajectory-bridging the glory of the Roman Empire with that of Britain’s own historical foundations.

By trapping the essence within the book he writes and forces an acknowledgement of how intrinsic definitions of imperial Britain "as a pastoral ideal or racialized body" (Gikandi, P.24) must give way to the awareness of the manner in which "Europe constitutes itself as a subject gazing at the other" (P.20). The necessarily descriptive fictionality (through which historicism account is demonstrated when. upon approaching the coast of Africa, Corbin reflects upon “[h]ow fitting … the sight of Africa. that it should greet you so gently … It was in
order to be impressed, to confirm his schoolboy expectations fed on tales of famous adventures and explorers, that he had strained his eyes seaward” (The Book of Secrets. P.11). Living explains that:

[T]For one significant strand of imperial discourses. Africa represents the great unknown, a terrain to be systematically secured for reliable knowledge. its very existence limit to the power of Enlightenment . . . In another variant. Africa appears as the quintessential land of adventure, a place for European manhood to display its prowess. (P.258).

Tellingly, upon encountering "this menace-filled darkness” wherein "all one’s scientific objectivism seemed vulnerable” (The Book of Secrets. P.52). Corbin is confronted with epistolary failure, causing him to reflect on how far away the light of Europe seems. Vassanji rewords and reworks the ‘menace’ of the African night into something far more insidious. which, instead of preserving the difference between the European self and its racial others, overwhelms the carefully delineated boundaries constructed by sight and a language of “scientific objectivism” which disowns its representational nature, thus revealing how the vocabulary of rational detachment, far from being neutral, objective or disinterested. is itself a form of discourse involving "the creation, subjection and final appropriation of Europe’s ‘others” (Young, White Mythologies, P. 33).

In an article, "Am I a Canadian Writer?", M.G. Vassanji laments the homogeneity and latent racism of nation and national identity in his observation of how "multiculturalism" serves merely as "a holding area for immigrants, a quarantine to hold the virus ... while succeeding generations have time to emerge, fully ... assimilated ... who is multicultural except the immigrants ... those whose language is not English, whose culture is not western and Christian” Vassanji’s own identity-ethnically Indian. born in straightforward association of culture with race with nationality through the tracings and traces of diasporic movement across oceans, over continents, through histories. Thus. glossing Gilroy, Mondal points out that "the act of physical movement ... traverses-and thereby destabilises-those discursive formations
that seek to 'ground' our identity. Identity thus emerges through the interplay between 'roots' and 'routes'; (P.125). And if Rushdie asserts that:

Indian writers in England have access to a second tradition, quite apart from their own racial history. It is the culture and political history of the phenomenon of migration, displacement, life in a minority group. One can quite legitimately claim as one's ancestors the Huguenots, the Irish, the Jews; the past to which we belong is an English past. the history of immigrant Britain (P.20).

M.G. Vassanji intriguingly and subversively takes Rushdie's claim to a multiple inheritance one step further by posing the possibility of how "the sense of national self [is] also going to change...Canada's past lies not only in the native stories of the land itself, but also in Europe, and now in Africa and Asia," suggesting that not only do the histories of nations belong to diaspora, diasporic histories, with their complex and heterogeneous strands, also belong to the nation ("Am I a Canadian Writer?").

Here this work consists of three chapters. Here, the foundations have been laid of the argument by considering the ways in which Vassanji deploys the tropes of fragmentation and movement to pick apart the homogeneous, empty time of modernity, allowing other times and other places to insinuate themselves into his text. The present is split, rendered porous, becoming a site of flux and instability as it is invaded by other times and other places to insinuate themselves into his text. The present is split, rendered porous, becoming a site of flux and instability as it is invaded by other times and other places, compelling the reader to question and to allow for the provisionality of knowledge. The novel performs a re-configuration of the universal body of knowledge by privileging sound over writing, multiple refractions over mimetic reflection, movement over closure, and hyphenated identities and multivalent allegiances over the straightforward association of race with culture, or identity with nationality.
Chambers tells the readers that excess of questioning and raising the "ethical impossibility of ultimate closure. control, totality and the accompanying agenda of rendering all - scientifically, technically, politically, culturally - transparent. What exceeds the ubiquitous desire for closure, conclusion and confirmation of the self. is what exceeds and challenges our understanding." (Culture After Humanism, P.42). Manifesting within the novel as polyphony and mutability, this results in a here-and-now of hybrid temporalities wherein the modernity of the nation intersects with the 'other’ narratives and temporalities of religion, memory and hybrid affiliations. The mutability of the other is such that it cannot be fixed in place by the Occidental gaze; it is an unruly presence which cannot be explained or rationally known; it does not conform to official narratives. Its formlessness is an unruly presence that cannot be explained rationally, which does not conform to official narratives and constantly slips beyond one's grasp; for, as Cooppan suggests, it is "movement that allows the remaining of place and identity" (P.270).

Secondly, it is observed at the ways in which language, narrative, and representation contain but also constitute the identities of the colonized within the text. Narratives necessarily shape the ways in which they relate to the world. other people, as well as oneself at the same time, narratives seek to stabilize knowledge, to fix it in place, through the association of historicism with 'reason' that constructs reality through a transparent language that claims to neutrally present the world 'as it is'. Vassanji demonstrates to the reader, however, that the attempt by narrative to fix and thus control the objects of its representations is never entirely successful due to the internal contradictions and schisms that arise within its discourse. Put simply, efforts to contain the complex and multi-layered reality of identity and being only point towards the limitations and constructedness of any representation. It is only through an acknowledgement of the ways in which narratives of historicism, racism, nation and community work to define but also constrict individuals that one can begin to come to terms with the injustices and tragedies engendered through the fatal logic of boundaries. which alienate, separate, and divide the readers with our own selves.
Lastly, it has been tried to investigate how Vassanji draws the reader's attention to the gaps and silences in any given narrative through the condition of subalternity and marginality. Through the elusive and unrevealed histories of these characters, which incessantly and insistently haunt the annals of officials' history in the form of memories, secrets and oral histories that never find their way into the historical archive. The novel problematises the construction of a universalized body of knowledge which is selective in what it acknowledges to be 'factual' or valid sources of information. The novel shows how the histories of these marginal characters constantly evade attempts to pin them down within the chronology of history, the framework of knowledge, or within the space of a map. Thus they resist being incorporated into historical narrative, and hold in suspension any answer that might allow for their resolution and cause them to be set aside, or locked away in neat parentheses. In an ironic reference to the tenets of Enlightenment empiricism, Fernande's student presents a paper on how "What Is Not Observed Does Not Exist" (P.92), suggesting that it is, rather, the failure to observe what remains out of sight that constitutes what is simultaneously a blind spot, but also the gap that prevents the closure of knowledge.

The chapter will also look at how the manifestation of ghosts, spirits and haunting within the novel serve as a metaphor for subaltern histories—particularly apt for their existence as phenomena that continue to elude, yet plague modern science, raising questions that the powers of rationality and observation are unable to definitely resolve. The splitting of the modern present is accomplished through the glimpses, Vassanji gives the readers into the interstices of Eurocentric history-cracks that pry apart the present narrative, giving way to an excess that signals to the readers the limitations of humanism and the singular point of view from which the world is constructed in Eurocentric discourse, such as in the case of subaltern histories and memories, which constantly evade attempts to pin them down within the chronology of historical records or within the space of map.

By demonstrating the complicated and often contradictory negotiations of meaning and identity that take place within the borderlands, Vassanji activates the
reader's awareness of how History's excessive 'others' disturb the very premise of the universal eye1 upon which European humanism rests. Unsettled and unsettling, the 'other' is an unruly presence that constitutes but also reveals the arbitrary outer limit of universal knowledge. Always emerging as something more, something other than, the 'other' is what has been cast out, but also that which threatens the borders; it also haunts the self as an unsettling alternative not yet acknowledged. Mariamu's tale of possession suggestively demonstrates the way in which the demonic resides within the domestic, providing the reader with a sense of how this spiritual disturbance is in fact the manifestation of problems within the community, rather than in an afflicted Mariamu. In other words, the “beyond” (P.1) that Bhabha theorises is also within: abjected histories emerge from the interstices of History, overflow its boundaries, and crack it right open. By signaling the existence of what lies beyond the paradigm of universal humanism, of stories that do not need to end, and meaning which does not need to be foreclosed, excess compels a ceaseless questioning of the present, of the self, allowing for ways out, and other ways of being.