Chapter - 2

The Gunny Sack: Reminiscences
The exploration of geographical boundaries, whether actual physically marked boundaries between different communities, races and cultures is beautifully sketched in M.G. Vassanji's first novel, *The Gunny Sack* which is also the first novel to explore the history and the story of the Indians in East Africa during the colonial period who were forced to leave, after the Independence of Africa, with feelings of alienation. The novel is the recipient of the best First Novel for the African region of the Commonwealth Writer's Prize, 1900. This first novel by a Nairobi-born writer raised in Dar-es-Salaam, Tanzania celebrates the spirit of Asian pioneers. Muslims from India who moved to East Africa in the early 1900s. Living under German colonial rule, the family of Dhanji Govindji become permanent residents of Africa while witnessing historical events that result in the birth of African nationalism. Vassanji has created a family memoir, a coming-of-age story that looks at the past with affection and understanding. He shows that the hopes and dreams of Indian immigrants were essentially the same as those of Europeans who passed through Ellis Island: education for their children and a more prosperous future for the next generation.

This reputed and popular novel *The Gunny Sack* spans four generations, right from the beginning of the Indian settlement on the coast of East Africa which is under the Germans and then changes hands and passes on to the British and finally to its Independence when the Indians no longer feel welcome or safe and withdraw from East Africa. Vassanji begins the novel at the chronological beginning of the Shamsi community in Cutch in India and moves on from there to the present, through the progress and decline of the Indian Shamsi community in East Africa. When they are forced to leave Africa, they do not think of returning to India but only of an onward, forward-looking journey, further to the west.

"Memory. Ji Bai would say, is this old sack here, this poor dear that nobody has any use for any more". (*The Gunny Sack*, p.1).
The Gunny Suck problematizes the concept of boundaries and space by questioning the primary space homeland of Sona and Kala – is Africa, their homeland, the place where they were born and grew up and which is the only home that they have seen but only know as the homeland of their ancestors, which is locked in the memory of Ji Bai and given to them as knowledge, from the past, or is their homeland the present location of their migration to a new country? The narrative explores this question as it moves through memory and imagined locations based on real geographical space: it connects the individual and the community so that the identification of homeland as a spatially and temporally focused on specific location, become s difficult proposition. As the secondary space of the first generation gradually becomes the primary space for the next generations, it causes confusion in the perception of the second and third generations; which is their homeland and primary space? They do not know where they actually belong because of mixed loyalties, but their present context of minoritarian status creates a neo-colonial situation.

As the novel begins, Salim Juma, in exile from Tanzania, opens up The Gunny Sack given to him by a beloved great aunt. Inside it he discovers the past, his own family history and the story of the Asian experience in East Africa. Its relics and artifacts bring with them the lives of Salim’s Indian great grandfather, Dhanji Govindji, his extensive family, and all their loves and betrayals.

Dhanji Govindji arrives in Matamu -- from Zanzibar, Porbandar and ultimately, Junapur and has a son with an African slave named Bibi Taratibu. Later, growing in prosperity he marries Fatima, the woman who will bear his other children. But when his half-African son Husein disappears, Dhanji Govindji pays out his fortune in trying to find him again. As the tentacles of the First World War reach into Africa, with the local German colonists fighting British invaders, he spends more and more time searching. One morning he is suddenly murdered; he had spent not just his own money but embezzled that of others to finance the quest for his lost son.

Multiculturalism writings are invariably concerned with exile, memory, diasporic consciousness, longing for return, alienation and search for identity. All
these characteristics find unique articulation in the novels of M.G. Vassanji. Vassanji has produced five novels tracing the migration of people from South Asia in the late 19th century to East Africa, and then from Africa to North America in the 1960s and 1970s. The Gunny Sack is one of them. It deals with the story of four generations of Asians in Tanzania. Here the author has examined the theme of identity, displacement and race-relations. He also has endeavoured to retain and re-create oral histories and mythologies that have long been silenced.

The Gunny Sack celebrates the spirit of Asian pioneers who moved to East Africa in the late 1800s and early 1900s. The novelist provides an insightful look into the culture of one particular group of Indians who were born and grew up in East Africa during the mid 20th century. Living under German colonial rule, the family of Dhanji Govindji become permanent residents of Africa while witnessing historical events that result in the birth of African nationalism. In this fantastic piece of work the writer focuses on the problematic union of Last Africa and South Asia. The tension arising from the contact between the two lands is captured mostly in the characters that migrated from India to East Africa. Here most of the Asian African characters such as Dhanji Govindji and his descendant Salim Juma take part in the quest for new homes and identity. It is interesting that the same quest for new homelands that were more promising in terms of prosperity was to be Govindji’s downfall.

The main story of this novel is narrated by Salim Juma. It is he who is bequeathed a ‘Gunny Sack’ by his mystical grandaunt named Ji Bai. This sack is an ancient sack that is full of mementos. It appears as a metaphor for the collective memory. It becomes a device to recall the author’s family history in India, Africa, England and finally North America. Nicknamed ‘Sheru’, the gunny unravels a gallery of characters whose unwritten stories reflect the Asian experience in East Africa over four generations. It seems that the novel is both the story of one extended family’s arrival and existence in East Africa as well as a repository for the collective memory and oral history of many other Asian Africans.

The first section of The Gunny Sack is very interesting. In this section one sees that Dhanji Govindji arrives to Zanzibar as a trader from Junapur in Gujarat in the late
19th century and then settles at Matamu in Tanzania. He has a son, Husein, with a discarded African slave, Bibi Taratibu. Later growing in prosperity, Dhanji Govindji marries Fatima. She is of Indian extraction. She is the Squint-eyed daughter of a Zanzibari widow with unknown antecedents. But when Dhanji Govindji's half African son Hussein disappears into the east hinterland, he pays out his fortune in attempt to find him again. In search of Husein he devotes more and more time. In this search mission he spends not just his own money but embezzles that of others to support his search mission of his lost son. One morning Dhanji Govindji is mysteriously murdered. The cause of Dhanji’s death is narrated as a shabby affair that might be tied to his share of ties with his relatives in India so as to establish himself and his descendents in the new world:

A few years before, the Shamsi community in India had been tom apart by strife. Various parties had sprung up, with diverging fundamentalist positions, each taking up some thread of the complex and sometimes contradictory set of traditional beliefs, hitherto untainted by theologian hands, to some extreme conclusion and claiming to represent the entire community. The bone of contention among Shia, Sunni, Sufi and Vedanti factions became the funds collected in the small centres and mosques. Faced with this situation, Dhanji simply stopped sending the money on to any of the big centres and kept it in trust for the Matamu community. The strife had resulted in the murders in Qombay and Zanzibar. And now it seemed, in Matamu…Mukhi Dhanji Govindji, Sharrifu to the Swahilis. was buried with full honours by the village of Matamu, carried in a procession of males headed by Shamsi. Rhatia and Swahili elders to the grave. grieved for by women ululating along the way. (The Gunny Suck, PP.42-43).
One can read the implications of the strife outside Matamu in far away India as being intimately connected with Matamu itself. Moreover, one can also read the implications of Govindji’s mental turmoil on his community. As he has stopped sending funds to the mother community of the Shamsis back in India, Govindji declared the autonomy of the Shamsis of East Africa and sought independence. There are insinuations in the novel that Dhanji Govindji had used money drawn from public coffers for personal needs without consulting other faithful. This independence of the mind was the one that had enabled him to make a journey in a dhow across the Indian Ocean to Zanzibar. In the novel, this act of dislocation from the original homeland in Junapur and locating oneself in the East African coast is very significant. This act was to be the initial step in the troublesome quest to belong that future generation of Govindji’s family such as Salim Juma were to face.

The second section of the novel is named after Kuslum. Kuslum is Govindji’s granddaughter. She becomes the wife of Husein’s son named Juma. In the novel she appears as the mother of Salim Juma who is the main narrator of The Gunny Sack. Here in this section we learn of the older Juma’s childhood as a second-class member of his stepmother’s family after his mother Moti dies. At this time the family of Govindji has mushroomed into various related families of cousins and siblings. The late Juma Husein’s family has emigrated again from Tanzania to Kenya in colonial Nairobi. After his wedding to Kuslum there is a long wait in the unloving bosom of his stepfamily for their first child, Begum.

It is the 1950s, when whispers are beginning of the Mau-Mau rebellion. A segment of the novel addresses itself to a description of these troubled times of rising African nationalism. When Juma Husein dies in Jarobi, his family of Kuslum with her children including young Salim Junam, the narrator, moves back to Dar es Salaam. And gradually Kuslum’s son Salim Juma takes over the narration of The Gunny Suck from his mother. recalling his own childhood. His life guides the narrative from here on. Memory becomes the guiding force at this stage.

Salim Juma now remembers his mother's store and neighbor's intrigues the beauty of his pristine English teacher, Miss Penny (later Mrs. Gaunt) at primary
school in colonial Dar, cricket matches and attempts commune with the ghost of his father. It is a vibrantly described, deeply felt childhood. Tanzania where the family lives meanwhile is racked by racialist political tensions on its road to independence, which comes about as Salim Juma reaches adolescence. With the surge in racial tension and nationalist rioting, several members of his close-knit community leave the country under feelings of rising unhomeliness. They go England, the United States and Canada in search of other new homes.

'Amina' is the title of the third section of The *Gunnny Suck*. She is an African girl. Salim Juma loves her too much. He meets her while doing his National Service at Camp Uhuru, a place he feels he has been sent to in error. This is so because the National Service was a prerequisite for joining University. Due to their exclusivity and unpredictable future as a migrant community, most Asian African families would go long way to make their children go to National Service Camps near Dar es Salaam where the core of the community lived. But Salim's name – Juma, an African name, and his dark complexion due to his ancestry from Bibi Taratibu could not convince the recruitment officers that he was not an indigenous African. In spite of peas from his family he was sent to the farthest National Service Camp in northern Tanzania where he was the only Asian African amidst many indigenous African colleagues. This exposure was a blessing as disguise as it forged his African sense of self; only for it to be betrayed later in the novel, when he was persecuted on racial grounds by the Tanzanian government, because he was of Asian extraction.

Salim develops an intimate relationship with Amina at the camp Uhuru. Amina is an indigenous African, and their relationship inevitably causes Juma's family anxiety, until the increasingly militant Amina leaves for New York. Salim becomes a teacher at his old school in independent Dar. After that he marries an Asian African but keeps a place for Amina in his heart and in fact names his daughter Amina. When the older Amina returns from the United States, the increasingly repressive independent Tanzanian government arrests her. In fact she had turned into a racial human rights activist. Due to his close acquaintance with Amina, Salim
hurriedly exiles abroad on safety grounds. He leaves an Asian African wife and
daughter.

The novel ends with dejected Salim alone in a basement of a flat somewhere
in Canada, the last memories coming out of a gunny sack he inherits, hoping that he
will be the last migrant of his family-line. The last paragraph of the last chapter of *The
Gunny Sack* captures Juma’s wish:

> The running must slop now. Amina. The cycle of escape
and rebirth, uprotting and regeneration. must cease in me.
Let this be last runway, returned with one last. quixotic
dream. Yes, perhaps here lies redemption. a faith in the
future, even if it means for now to embrace the banal
present, to pick up the pieces of our wounded selves. our
wounded dreams, Little, One, we dreamt the world, which
was large and beautiful and exciting and it came to us this
world, even though it was more than we bargained for, it
came in large soaking waves and wrecked us but we are
thankful, for to have dreams was enough. And so, dream,
Little Flowered. (PP.268-269).

Salim Juma, the narrator who now lives as an exile in Canada, utters this
above-mentioned passage. He is just one of the droves of Asian Africans who left
East Africa after independence for Britain, Canada and the United States. After the
migration of his forebear, Dhanji Govindji, from Junapur in India to Zanjibar; after
the migration of his family from Tanzania to Kenya. then back to Tanzania and finally
after his migration to Canada, Salim is tired and exhausted by the perpetual feelings
of unhomeliness and impossibility of belonging.

The question that the readers should ask themselves is: Is Vassanji’s choice of
the imaginative scene as a concluding part of *The Gunny Sack* a matter of chance or is it a conscious discursive strategy that make the reader reflect on the dislocated
experience of the Asian Africans of East Africa over historical times? Is exiled Salim
the product of the locations he occupied or rather his community occupied as migrant people in East Africa?

The answer to the reflection above may arise out of a further sampling of Givindji's originary story in the first part of the novel, in the very beginning with the story of Salim's progenitor, Dhanji Govindji. In one particular instance reminiscing about how he came to East Africa, Govindji tells his African born daughter-in-law, Ji Bai: 'As you approach it [Africa] from the sea, as you entire the harbour: you see all these beautiful, white buildings of the Europeans...behind his beautiful white European face of the town is our modest Indian district, every community in its own separate area. and behind that the African quarter going right into the forest'. (P.29).

The community of South Asians who came to East Africa before or at the time of British imperialism has now given rise to several other generations that in popular East African discourse are known simply as 'Asians'. In East Africa this community inhabits a middle area, both in colour and status. between European whites and African blacks. The attempt to make sense out of inhabiting worlds in-between the black and the white has in fact become a congenital theme and leitmotif in almost all genres of writings of Asian from East Africa. The imaginative writings of Asian African writers such as Peter Nazareth, Bahadur Tejani, Pheroze Nowrojee, Jagjit Singh and Kuldip Sondhi who wrote about the Asian experience in East Africa in the 1960s and early 1970s serve as prominent examples. This literary agenda persists in the oeuvre of the more contemporary Vassanji. It is argued that Vassanji's community, historically and socio-politically, was strictly never a part of the Black/White (pot) coloniality but a community in-between the two. By demarcating the land into three and situating the Asians in-between the Africans and the Whites, M.G. Vassanji is playing out his commitment as a historical translator but is also doing other things as well.

At the very outset of The Gunny Sack, an examination of the settings reveals that they convey a certain sense of in-between ness, especially when seen from the perspective of the Asian Africans of East Africa. Take the example of the place
Matamu, a fictional location somewhere in present-day Tanzania, especially as described in the following passage:

Matamu, the name always had a tart sound to it. an after taste to the sweetness. a far-off echo that spoke of a distant, primeval time. the year zero. An epoch that cast a dim hut somber shadow present. It is the town where my forebear unloaded his donkey one day and made his home. Where Africa opened its womb to India and produced a being who forever stalks the forest in search of himself. (PP. 30-40).

A sense of identity. a feeling of discrimination and demarcation. has always been in the writings of the literary members of Indian diaspora. Writing from a 'hyphenated' space probably instigates authors like M.G. Vassanji to manifest their expressions of identity. In The Gunny Sack, M.G. Vassanji talks about volatile union of Africa and Expatriate Indians. The being formed from this union is charged with the relentless quest of trying to find its own true meaning. The identity that the Indians are searching for is produced through this union. Salim Juma recounts the consequences of the family movement from Porhandar, India to Zanzibar, Africa. The narration carries an air of vividness and a sense of reality, as Salim recounts the fortune of his family under German, then British colonialism, and finally under Julius Nyrere’s socialism in independent Tanzania. It is a spirited saga of alliances, rivalries, success and failures. It illustrates the ability of the Shamsi community to survive oppression, fragmentation and displacement. For these children of Africa and India, the question of identity becomes an important issue. ‘The maintenance of traditions and culture turns out to be significant. (“Introduction”, in Oppositional Aesthetics: Reading from a Hyphenated Space, P.vii).

M.G. Vassanji seems to suggest that when several cultures exist together, it is essential for each culture to have its own distinguishing identity. But when this identity is imposed on a particular culture on the basis of race, colour and religion, the cruel brutalities become rife with reality. Vassanji focuses on this part of reality in his works. In The Gunny Sack the colour of human creed becomes important.
characters of this novel seem to draw their identities on this basis. The following cosmogonic myth offered to salim by his mother Kulsum attests to this fact:

When God was well and ready after all his exertions finally to create mankind, he sat himself beside a red-hot oven with a plate of dough. From this he fashioned three identical dolls. He put the first doll into the oven to finish it, but alas, brought it out too soon. It came out white and undone. In this way was born the white race. With this lesson learnt, the Almighty put the second doll into the oven, but this time he kept it in too long. It came out burnt and black. Thus the black race finally the one and only put the last doll inside the oven, and brought it out just the right time. It came out golden brown. the Asian, simply perfect. (P.73). This 'theory of creation' seems to be the basic theory around which the whole novel revolves. Even the main characters such as the narrator Salim get their names according to this theory. (P.73). Thus the nicknames: Sona for the golden boy, the youngest and favourite, my brother, Jamal; Kala for the one who came between Salim, Salum in Swahili, the overdone. (P.74).

The narrator's mother invokes the above-cited myth to explain the politics of colour and belonging to her sons Salim and Sona. They are reminded of that they occupy the same place as their forefathers whom they relate to in two ways. This is by way of skin colour and cultural identity and by the way of the interstitial location they occupy in-between the black and white races of their world.

The sense of being that Vassanji portrays for all the characters comes from the theory of discrimination. Perhaps through this observation, Vassanji draws for attention not only to the circumstances under which Asian Africans developed their interstitiality but also to the fact that they have lost their sense of a secure identity. theirs is now an identity of the in-between space, an identity that does not make sense in a world interpreted in terms of Black or White.

At one place in the novel. Kala Juma narrates his sexual encounter with the Swahili girl Amina: "I heaved and embraced her waist, pressing deeper...and I got her...and her legs moved apart ever so slightly to receive me". (P. 222).
The contentment to the conquest of aggressive, intrusive male sexuality over
the supine, passive, sex hungry female body is proved to be brief and illusory.
Mother Kulsum’s objections to this affair thwart it. Edward. Salim Juma’s foster
father, too frowns upon the alliance. He says to Kala Juma, 'Africans and Asians are
different…it's like the story of…' (P.223).

The unsaid part of this rebuke speaks a whole volume of an unhappy family
history of cross-alliance or misalliance that family history of cross-alliance or
misalliance that Dhanji had started. Desire of the narrator for autonomous selfhood
becomes inconsequential in the face of the historical forces of race and class
difference in the diasporan space. A constant sense of shame, discomfiture and
uncertainty about self-identity owing to being a half-cast prevents him from forging
relationships in terms of marriage with Zainab and affiliating himself with remnants
of an already fractured Shamsi community. For his dubious background he suffers
violence and humiliation in the hands of Zanib’s brother. Thus he turns to Amina.

During Kala Juma’s brief affair with Aniina, the barriers of race and class
created by the colonial history of Africa between them prove to be insurmountable in
the post-independent nation. The exclusionary discourse of 'Africa and Africans' after
independence calls into play the racial categories of discrimination and difference, in
which Kala Juma stands on the fringes of the nation as 'the other'. In this context the
following conversation between Kala Juma and Amina is significant:

"Why do you call me an Indian? I was born here. My father
was born even my grandfather." She accusingly answers,
"And then? Beyond that? What did they come to do. these
ancestors of yours?…perhaps you conveniently
forgot…they financed slave trade!" "And what of your
Swahili ancestors, Aniina? If mine financed slave trade,
your ran it."(P. 211).

The accusation and counter-accusation in which Kala Juman and Amina
engage demonstrate how in a multiculturistic space of conflicting subjectivities 'past'
is deployed and counter deployed for inscribing oneself in ‘home’ while excluding the other. Here Juma’s attempts – as part of Indian multiculturalism – at staking claims to a land as home and forging intimate personal relationship are challenged by Amina. Arrogating to herself the orginary notions of indigenous self-hood, she constructs a discourse of post-independence nationhood and home from which some people labeled as ‘outsiders’ are to be excluded. What she clearly forgets is the mix-up of Arab-African races in her Swahili blood. The barriers of class and race that separated Amina from Kala Juma would not come in-between herself and Mark, for the white man from the first world enjoys universal preference in the global cultural economy for his racial superiority and imperial strength.

Amina comes home to Tanzania. She is charged with conspiracy to overthrow the government. Kala Juma fears that he too may be implicated in the same crime due to his association with Amina. So he runs away from the country and arrives in Canada in Lisbon and Boston. Many others, namely Uncle Goa, Zera Auntie, Hassan Uncle, Jamal Juma alias, Sona, Kala Juma’s brother too leave Tanzania, which proves hostile to the Indian multicultural in the post-independence period. Even in the New World they are treated badly. In such a situation the multicultural Vassanji’s fate or that of his fictional characters become really precarious, and they belong neither here nor there. As a result their identities become ambiguous and inauthentic both at the native home in the First World.

The multicultural subjectivities that Vassanji and his characters illustrate are transfigured many times over in multiple sites through self-chosen migrancy or enforced wanderings as well as exile. Since multicultural identities get constantly ruptured together with their language, class, race and gender denominations, and get mutated as well as reconstituted in the trans-local spaces, the orginary notions of home which are imagined over and over again in different ways across borders and boundaries become ambiguous in Vassanji’s case as well as in case of other multicultural writers. Having been removed from a place of supposed origin and without emotional, political and cultural affiliations, to territorially bound, static localities multicultural people move on, as indeed their homes do. Like tortoises and
their shells. Peter G. Mandeville, therefore, comments that ‘identity and place’ of multicultural communities ‘travel together’ and these communities practice ‘the complex politics of simultaneous here and there’.

Thus, there are the adventure and the pathos. the conflicts and the loves of the whole Afro-Asian experience. From Dhanji Govindji, who left Junapur on a bullock cart to Porbander and thence on a dhow to the magic isle of Zanzibar to the narrator’s younger brother who goes away to an American University to research the history of his community.

The backdrop of this tale is the socio-political face of the East African coast of Zanzibar and Tanganyika over a century. Through a mesh of charming childhood vignettes, we can see the effects on the Asian community of Tanganyika’s independence, riots, rebellion, nationalism and socialism.

The book reaches its most readable part in the predictable but poignant handling of the love affairs between the narrator (Salim) and the African girl Amina. “To have met in the jungle and fallen in love there, among people we did not know, on the banks of a stream, under a tree, how easy it was. No sooner were we back in the city than we started carrying the burdens of our races...For me, it was simply doing the unthinkable: to be the subject of discussion for anyone in the community, from the precocious ten-years olds to the senile: the children, religion, the differences, it’s not easy, nothing to do with racism, of course...And what words did Dar (as Salaam) say to her. To have fallen in love with one of the exploiter class, a dukawallah. mere agents of the British, these oily slimy cowardly Asians, what future did they have...The world had so much to offer a bright young African girl.” (P.79).

The novel is richly peopled with credible characters and there is a story on every page. Told with humour and understanding, the events chase each other and at times they tend to make the plot sag under their weight but then that is an accepted characteristic of the modem novel. The resulting mosaic leaves an unforgettable picture of the life of the Asian community, its practices and prejudices, its inroads into insular character.
The quest for home highlights the dilemmas of an expatriate community or individual and arises questions, which introduce fissures in a neatly devised discourse of rootedness and belongingness. In his fiction, he explores the fissures and interstices in the overseas community of Gujarati traders who migrated to Africa in the late 19th century, during the height of colonialism. The axis of Vassanji's fiction is the rigorous questioning of his own community's history. Tied with this recollection of his community's past is his reconstruction of the East African as well as the North American history. Africa and America provide the backdrop to the Indian lives that he re-members and re-constructs. However, the relationship of the writers of Indian origin with Africa has not been very pleasant. Naipaul has come under fire from African scholars for his negative portrayal of Africans in his writings. It has been argued that the Indian perception of Africa is not different from that of the white writers. Naipaul's response to the Caribbean reality and presence of African majority can be argued to be more complex and self-searching, here one can not overlook the scorn peering through Naipaul's writings. Vassanji's attitude towards Africa is more sympathetic. His tone is more yielding. Though he has migrated to Canada via the United States, his emotional ties with Africa are kept intact. For Vassanji, the Chronicler of his community's history, sojourn in Africa and later in North America becomes defining forces responsible for shaping up the present of the small migrant Indian community to which he belongs. The reconstruction of his community's history is not the only concern of Vassanji. As a writer he wishes to understand his present and sees it as his duty to locate displaced and the other marginal communities in shifting power relations. It is important for Vassanji to "begin at the beginning" to talk about the past. This the creative burden of the writer, who becomes in Vassanji's own words.

... a preserver of the collective tradition, a folk historian and myth maker. He gives himself a history; he recreates the past ... having reclaimed it, having given himself a history, he liberates himself to write about the present. Reclaiming of the past and liberate his self from the Western regimes of representation. (P.21).
But as a conscious inhabitant of a multicultural society it is the present that concerns Vassanji. A threat, an impending doom, fear of extinction urges the narrator of *The Gunny Sack* to tell his story with all its necessary digressions. He inherits memories in the shape of a gunny sack and bequeathed by recently dead step-grandmother. Each article in the sack is a tale of the past. After the old lady's demise, memories garnered in this gunny sack were almost burnt but to honour Ji Bai, as the old matriarch was called, it is passed on to the intended descendent. Salim aka Kala, the narrator, is obliged to preserve the past threatened as it is by the indifference of the family. The narrative, therefore, develops retrospectively. Rummaging inside the sack he picks out the articles, each telling him about his and his community's history in Africa. *Shamisi* is a community of traders. For over a century they had been trading along the eastern coast of the African continent. Hence their migration is volitional driven largely by economic considerations. Indeed there is another aspect to their migration, as explicated by the narrator - the spiritual aspect. Intending to tell his tale from "the beginning" re recounts the appearance of a tall, bearded man ... in a long white rock and a white skull cap" Three hundred years ago under whose influence the whole village" Converted to an esoteric sect of Islam that considered Allah as simply a form of Vishnu." (P.3). He told then that "one day the sun would rise from the west... They must wait for a saviour" (P.4).

But the saviour as promised by Shamas Piz some three centuries ago, had not appeared. Hence going west has also a journey to look for a saviour. This fact also becomes the starting point of his novel *Amriika*. Ramji remembers his ancestors who were:

Told [...] to await the final avatar of their god Vishnu. In Grandma's words, the sun would arise that day from the west. How far was the west? Where did it begin? [...] My people sought it first in Africa, an ocean away, where they settled more than a hundred years ago. (P.7).

The similar ways in which both the novels begin underline the importance of this event in Vassanji's creative matrix. The mythical is an important ingredient of re-
membering. Myth crystallizes a society’s self-image and tarnishes the way to enter into history. One might consider that this how the discipline of historiography evolved. Myth gives way to history, which eventually can be critically observed. This way of recollecting allows Vassanji to negotiate the existential claims to the community. We find the mythical interweaved with the historical. There is indeed a social reason affecting this migration but the actual physical movement triggered by religious anxieties is validated by prophetic expectations. Vassanji notes in The Gunny Sack that eclectic Shamsis were persecuted by the purists from both the Hindu and Muslim groups which gave many belonging to the sect the final pushout.

In those trying times Dhanji Ciovinjji, the great grandfather of the narrator, makes the decision to leave for Zanzibar, the “enchanted isle” he dreamt of as a boy. This “Jewel of Africa” was an anblem of security and prosperity for the Shamsis. The plot then begins with Dhanji’s life in Africa. He lands in the village called Matamu in 1885 and contacts the leaders, the Mukhi, of the already established Shamsi community. Mukhis help the newly arrived immigrants from his community settle down. In Dhanji’s case too the local Mukhi:

...found him some broken-down furniture and gave him merchandise on credit to start up with. And for good measure, he threw in a servant at a cheap price: ‘She knows how to cook; she’ll take care of you’. And with the sly smile of the elderly setting up a younger, added: ‘And who knows, it’s warm enough here, but can get quite cold at night. The ocean you know’. (PP.610-611).

This is the first home that the immigrant managers to inhabit and establish. The inadequacy of this home is prevalent and pervades the narrative scheme. What is home?

The servant, a discarded slave, presented thoughtlessly as one of the household items, introduces first of the concatenated crises that beset this migrant Indian Community. The community back home was at appalled at this turn of events.
'Missionaries' were sent from Bombay to "help keep the community in line". (P.11). But since "they never made it past the allures of Zanjibar" the "help-castes" continued "littering the coast from Mozambique to Karachi". (P.11). Meanwhile Dhanji Govindji and Bibi Taratibu, the Black slave, had a son whom they named Huseni. At this point talking to the gunny sack, which he named Sheherbanno after the legendary storyteller Shehrazade. Salim, the grandson of Huseni, asks a poignant, though unfinished, question:

Tell me, Sheherbanno, would the world be different if that trend had continued, if there had been more Husenis, and if these chocolate Husenis with curly hair and grown up unhindered, playing barefoot in Kanzus and Kofias, clutching Arabic readers... (P.11).

This aborted query is what begins to shape the narrative. The Gunny Sack starts churning out stories that seek to establish this query as the central concern of the narrative. The central concern, however, is not definable. The aporia created by the lack, - even suppression of the African presence haunts the tale told by the gunny sack. The aporia becomes the driving force for the narrative. The novel, thus, provides the space where the relations between the races are reexamined.

Half-caste Huseni is unacceptable to the community. Dhanji has to many woman from his own community. The desire of the community to preserve its identity in an alien land runs counter to the actual negotiations that take place there. The conflict of these two tendencies affects fissures in individual lives. The divided affection pulls the migrant in two opposite directions. The desire to be faithful to the community jostles with a desire to go beyond the traditional boundaries. And though he had other sons from his wife, the special affection for the first-born Husani never diminished. His birth from the black woman did not make him less a son to dhanji. And while Bibi Taratibu had to go after Dhanji's marriage the son stayed. He too was worried to a girl from the Shamsi community. But a fissure is affected in the son's life too as he was prohibited from seeing the mother. Dhanji himself wanted his son to forget his black ancestry as it would make things much less complicated. He says:
You fool, said the father in an uncontrolled range, 'you are descended from the Solar Race! What do you have to consort with slaves for'? The sullen Huseni, eyes red, shifted on his feet. He raised his head. Then he simply spat at his father's feet and walked out. He never returned. He was heard from again. (P.22).

The expatriate self is not a unitarily constituted agency. It is not merely a matter of transported subjectivity but transplanted mode of being. The old discourses of rootedness and origin crack up under the strain of supplanting narrative of exile. Dhanji's son is 'Simba' the Swahili term for lion, to his play mates and to Dhanji himself he is 'Bhima' the mythological hero of ancient epic The Mahabharata. The Swahili and Sanskrit, in local and the classical, the recent and the ancient, mingle in the half – caste Huseni. But the Shamsi Mukhi, the head of eclectic community which combines Hinduism and Islam in its forth, cannot accommodate the racial difference. The dangerous hybridity of his favourite child'' threatens his own narrative of the pure Indian race. This racial divide is, in practice, however is not tenable and this is what the narrator questions. Sitting with his gunny sack he seeks to know his black ancestors.

The great grandson of Bibi Taralibu, the black slave from the "interiors" and grandson of Huseni, the half-caste. Salim seeks that constituent of the narrative of his past which would authenticate his identity as an Afro-Asian. The absence of any echo from the black Africa creates an unimaginable void in the lives of those who once entered into a conversation with its dark secrets. Dhanji could not bear the separation of his son. He spent all his life's savings searching after Huseni. In an ironic turn of events he is killed. This was attributed to the growing schism in the Shamsi community. The unrest is setting the Shamsi community in India, which had caused Dhanji to leave his native land, had followed then to Africa:

A few years before, the Shamsi community in India and been torn apart by strife. Various parties had sprung up, with diverging fundamentalist positions, each taking some
thread of the complex and sometimes contradictory set of traditional beliefs, hitherto unattained by theologian hands, to some extreme conclusion and claiming to represent the entire community. The bone of contention among these Shia, Sunni, Sufi and Vedantic factions became the funds collected in the centres and mosques. Faced with this situation, Dhanji Govindji and simply stopped sending the money on to any of the high centres and kept it in trust for the Matamu community. The strife had resulted in murders in Bombay and Zanzibar. And now, it seemed, in Matamu. (P.42).

The growing obsession to preserve the purity in an increasing transgressive social space gives rise to violent repercussions. There are indications, however, that the muki was killed for all together different reasons. In addition to spending his own wealth, Dhanji had misappropriated the funds of the Shamsi community of which he was in charge as the mukhi. He used that money to finance his travels when he went out looking for his son. The ethnic absolutism, in the form of racial difference, which runs in the family is challenged. The same process is seen in Dhanji’s refusal to share the funds with the metropolitan centres. She funds would have been much better utilized in absorbing the local communities within the fold of families and communities. The Asians did not own Africa. Dhanji’s wife, Fatima, not only displaced Bibi Taratibu she could never accept the son of a slave woman as her own. The sense of racial superiority prohibits her from accepting him as son. For her, who had come from the family of slave owners, it was unthinkable to bestow motherly love to the one fit only to be a slave;

Tell me; what is my sin, that I should inherit this slave's son with my marriage...this jungle who stands out like a wart in this family, a bad influence on my children, running their good name...Arab blood runs through my veins, I
have Shirazi ancestors, look at my skin, see how different it is from yours...(P.28).

This with holding of motherly affection is contrasted with the observation that the narrator makes as he recollects Matamu, the small town where his great grandfather unloaded his donkey and – 'where Africa opened its womb to India' (P.39). Indians, on the part, were scared to traverse the interior of the vast continent run aloofness, this 'coastalised' existence was responsible for the allegation that the Asians do not integrate.

Vassanji’s Shamsi characters have an ambiguous, even complacent, relationship with the colonial governments. As a trading community the Sharmsis were indispensable to the colonial establishment, first the German and later the British. In the face of a British assault the German colonialist, Herr Weiss, comes to Gulam, the new mukhi, with a suggestion, which is more of a business transaction. This episode captures the essence of relationship existing among the three races. The racial stratification is starkly evident. The German, respectfully called Rwana Wasi, talks to Gulam:

I am giving you advice, Bawana Gulam. Take your family a few kilometers inland, move to some town there until the war is over...Tell the other Indians what I have said. If the British attack, the African can run to the bushes, but where will you run?’ Thank you, Bhana Wasi. I will talk to others. But what about you?’ ‘I am going to fight for my King... My watchman has agreed to join me as an askari in the army, and my two servants will come as porters. And this mtumwa, Kasoro Mbili – stand up! – I want you to have him’. The boy obediently stood up. Gulam eyed him and waited for the German to continue. ‘In return’, said Bwana Wasi, ‘I would like to have some supplies from you’. (P.48).
The colonist, the trader, and the slave all are present in this episode. The colonist provides security to the trader and the trader in return provides supplies to the colonialist. It is mentioned in the novel, "German justice was harsh, swift and arbitrary. In return, you could leave your store unattended without fear of robbery. Thieves had their hands copped off" (P.14). The relationship between the Asian and the white seemed symbiotic while the real oppressed was black. Even in the above episode, while the Asian trader and the European planter discuss the plan in the face of the war, the black slave silently accepts his Fate. Like a commodity the changes hands. For the narrator these anecdotes and snatches of memory are cardinal constituents of his search for an authentic community history and his own identity. The old boundaries that fence the once unitary, or at least so perceived, but now increasing fragmenting identity has to be transgressed. The discursive nature of identity has to be re-conceptualised, "thinking it in its new, displaced or decent position while the paradigm". (P.3). The paradigm or the context of an Asian identity in Africa is fossilized in an image of a wily "dukawaller" an exploitative shopkeeper colluding with the colonist. The story that the gunny sack reveals to Saleem skews the outlines of this image.

For Vassanji, home is multi-dimensional in urban sites. Land based ties and strong social bonds that would generally hold together people rooted in nation, rural places do not apply this great with who is Kenyan – Tanzanian and expatriate writer of Ismaili – Indian descent, domiciled in Canada. During to his over-hyphenated identity, the question of exilic condition in the urban landscape for him becomes enturined with the notion of home away from home in one sense and no home in particular in another sense. Home in his case is freighted with enormous investments of the imaginary. At least this is the impression he costs on the readers when one reads his interviews. In an interview with Sayantan, Vassanji says, "I am more comfortable defining myself in terms of my locale and city. That way Dar es Salaam would be probably the first place that figures as home. Every writer belongs to his city, to the streets and his urban landscape. assuming he is part of an urban ethos. Another place I could call home in that sense would be l'oronto in Canada." In another interview with Gene Carey, Vassanji says," Once I came to United States I
had a fear of losing my link with Tanzania. Then I feared going back because if I went back I feared losing the new world one had discovered". (P.33).

So Vassanji’s statements make it clear that he is caught between the homes ‘there’ and ‘here’. On the basis of the idea of multi-locational home he conciliates between the nostalgic desire for home and community through his characters. These characters are people living community through his characters. These characters are people living on the fringes of host society and dreaming of a home, replete with intimate memories and feelings of emotional affiliations. The narrator’s remark in The Gunny Sack speaks volumes of the lives of the Indian traders there. among the trading immigrant peoples, loyalty to a land or a government, always loudly peoples, loyalty to a land or a government, always loudly professed, is a trait one can normally look for in vain. Governments may come and go, but the immigrants only concern is the security of their families, their trade and their savings.

Their lives that unfold a saga of self-survival though countless dispersion, losses, separations, ruptures are never mapped onto the history of the nation they have either left behind or the one they have come to as immigrants. Their family lore across generations builds up an intimate domestic context that is for removed from nationalist politics and recorded public memory.

In The Gunny Sack Salim’s words touch on the points of ruptured in the articulation of Asian African subjectivity and experience. It appears that the reclamation of his subjectivity through his keen memory offers propulsion into an empowered self-definition and self-knowledge. which is one of keen areas of post colonial discourse. The exiled space, Toronto from where Salim reminisces is actually a location of dislocation. This is a realm that resounds with the pressures of dislocation such as want, discomfort and nostalgia. Interestingly, his story also speaks of certain pleasure of dislocation such as relief and the possibility of dreaming another future again. It is this line of thought that Bhabha appears to be grappling with when says. The recesses of the domestic space become sotes for histories most entricate invasions. In that displacement. the borders between home and the world, become
confused and uncannily, the private and the public become part of each other, forcing upon the readers' vision that is divided and disorienting.

East Africa, seen from the exile location from where Salim Juma speaks, is not just a recess of the domestic space, but also an excess of that same place. It is excess in the sense that much as Salim and other Asian Africans who flee the region after independence may want to do so. They and farge on, they may never be able to do so. They carry the region with them within their minds. In this way, Salim Juma is like Vassanji who says that no matter where he goes, he carries the East African world with him, indeed with him.

The writings of all the Indian diasporic writers usually focus on the discrimination, differentiation, injustice and inequality that have been a part of almost every East Indian immigrant. Such treatment of life has compelled them to become nostalgic. Perhaps that is the reason why those Bogs.

These writers tend to draw upon the reservoir of memories from their homelands. In The Gunny Suck Salim Juma's remarkable remembering includes finding the significance of ancestral genesis and genealogy. Vassanji, a diasporic Indian writer, talks more about East Africa than anything else. His novels The Gunny Suck and The Book of Secrets and his collection of short stories, Uhuru Street – are all focused on the lines of Indians in East Africa. Vassanji says:

I write about my own people because we are a people without any sense of history and place. A person without history is like an orphan. We know the name of the place we stay, we know our immediate surroundings, but we tend to look towards a future – tomorrow and day after tomorrow – of a better future may be. But where is our past? Where are our roots? (The Need to discover: M.G. Vassanji's Writings, P. 71).
Rosemary Marangoly George treats *The Gunny Sack* as a work of immigrant genre for characteristics such as disregard of national schemes, the use of a multi-generational cast of characters, a narrative tendency, full of repetitions and echoes and above all "curiously detached reading of experience of 'homelessness'. which is compensated for by an excessive use of the metaphor of *luggage*, both *spiritual* and material." (*The Politics of Home: Post-Colonial Relocations and Twentieth Century Fiction*, P.171). She seems to distinguish this genre from exile literature for its "detached and unsentimental reading of the experience of homelessness" and its refusal to engage in the politics of either home or nation. This distinction is confusing. If indifference to the politics of nation and rootlessness in the crux of the matter. what is important is how one whether an immigrant or an exile, has to reckon with one's past, return to one's cultural roots and conceive of one's cultural identity despite the anchorage of real nationhood and home. In an interview M.G. Vassanji says to Kanaganayakam: Once I went to the United States. suddenly the Indian connection became very important: the sense of origins, trying to understand the roots that we had in us." (*The Politics of Home: Postcolonial Relocations and Twentieth Century Fiction*, P.171).

Later while teaching physics in Toronto, Vassanji "began to encounter his East-African past." For him the past is an aesthetic necessity, and it has great sacral, heuristic value. In this context one can recall Pius Fernandes in Vassanji's *The Book of Secrets*. Fernandes says, "Of course the past matters, and that is why we need to bury it sometimes. We have to forget to be able to start again." (*The Book of Secrets*, P. 298).

In Vassanji's *The Gunny Sack* the historical past concerning origins engages his characters in a tortuous way, mediated through memories of countless displacements and ruptures: ... "Wisps of memory. Cotton bails gliding from the gunny sack. each a window to the world...Asynchronous images projected on *multiple* cinema screens...Time here is not the continuous co-ordinate...but a *collection* of blots like Uncle Jim drew in the Sunday Herald for the children. except that Uncle Jim numbered the blots for you so you traced the picture of a dog or a
horse when you followed them with a pencil....here you number your own blots and there is no end to them. and each lies in wait for you like a black hole from which you could never return.” *(The Gunny Sack.)* P.112.

Since a black hole is a condition in the outer space from which no matter and ray can escape, Vassanji uses this figurative as a dark. endless one way passage from which the diasporic self can't return. nor indeed can he progress towards any closure or resolution unless it is forced and deliberate. In this fictional scheme, migrancy turns out to be basically an interminable narrative journey without any beginning or end.

In *The Gunny Sack*, memory negotiates the colonial and postcolonial history of East Africa. Throughout the narrative 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 demographic profile of Indian diaspora in the African east coast, and finally the decolonization of Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Zanzibar and other nations constitute the troublesome destiny of the people. They are forced to migrate and remigrate to places both imaginary and real. Throught the novel Salim Juma negotiates communal and individual identities, the life of the continent of Africa and the lives of individuals. He explores the past, constructs genealogies and traces the complex formations of the sites of subjectivity through ruptures, dispersal and mutations.

The past is retrieved in *The Gunny Sack* and reconstituted only through the backward gaze upon the gunny sack that still carries the dust of Kariakoo, a street in Dar es Salaam where young Kala Juma. the narrator, fortuitously meets Grandmother, Ji Bai, who conjures from the past people, times and places for him. He admits : Thus past gets buried, but for my drab, my sagging ugly shehrbanoo, from which the dust of Kariakoo has not been shaken yet. (P.IO).

The dust-metaphorically, the remains of the dead-magically bodies forth the past and the entire line of forebears. Ji Bai speaks to him almost like a prophet. She says to him that she will give him his father Juma and his father Husein and his father-And thereupon begins Juma's journey back into the realms of past. He says :
"Ji Bai opened a small window into the dark past for me and a whole world flew in, a world of my great grandfather who left India and my great grandmother what was an African, the world of Matamu where India and Africa met and the mixture exploded in the person of my half-cast grand father Husein who disappeared into the forest one day and never returned, the world of a changing Africa where Africa and Europe met and the result was even more explosive, not only in the lives of men but in the life of the continent". (P.135).

The knowledge of one's origins and past, howsoever shameful and sordid, is necessary. The search for the origins and past is also a moral responsibility towards the posterity and Suture to be assumed, in addition to the necessity for self-knowledge and survival on the part of the diasporic self.

Thus Vassanji, through The Gunny Suck talks seriously about the volatile combining and expatriate Indians. The identity that the Indians arc searching for is produced through this union. The story told by Salim Juma recounts the consequences of the family movement from Porbander, India to Zanzibar, Africa. The narration modeled on The Arabian Nights carries an aim of vividness and a sense of reality as Salim recounts his family's fortunes, first under German, then British colonialism and finally under Julius Nyerere's Socialism, in Independent Tanzania. It is a spirited saga of alliance, rivalries, successes and failures. It illustrates the Shamshi community's - the Cutchi Ishmaeli Muslim community's - ability to survive oppression, fragmentation and displacement. For these children of Africa and India, the question of identity becomes an important issue. The maintenance of traditions and cultures turns out to be significant. The Gunny Suck recreates the Indians of East Africa, from the end of the 19th century through the harrowing first decades of 20th century, in great details and vividness. Thus multicultural society is evident everywhere. The characters of Kulsum, Amina and Ji Bai are arresting and zealous. The novel is filled with varied and colorful events, conventions, mingled with customs and taboos. The Gunny Suck is praised for its combination of history and fiction - a moving story told of a small community of African Asians, whom Vassanji called Shamsis - this
community corresponds to the **Ishmaelis** who regard Aga Khan as the 10th avatar to Vishnu.

_The Gunny Suck_ is the combination of an encyclopaedic memory with magisterial literary technique. It has _some_ stylistic resemblance to Rushdie's _Midnight's Children_, but a more general _resemblance_ to V.S.Naipaul's _A House for Mr. Biswas_. What _The Gunny Suck_ does for the East African **Ishmaelis** community? _A House for Mr. Biswas_ has done for the **Indo-Trinidadian** community; presented a comprehensive view of its history, whilst extracting the _most_ _significant_ factors that come out of history – cultural deracination, and transplantation. _multi-cultural co-existence, loss, exile, and homelessness_. Yet, Naipaul’s irony makes his novel altogether a different work – _more_ penetrating and regroups: _but_ less tolerant and accepting. This is Vassanji’s achievement that he _objectively_ shows the Shamsis – as the **Ishmaelis** are called in _The Gunny Sack_ – to be preoccupied mainly with survival, and, therefore, not greatly concerned with moral niceties.

In the novel, _The Gunny Sack_, the sense of place becomes _one_ of the most important elements the writer can manipulate to condition the representation of individuals and community. He delineates the process of growth and subsequent fall, that is, from its establishment to its crest of success and then to its trough of destruction. In other words, the place becomes the focal point in the negotiation of identity politics with multicultural character. The concept of Africa as a place to be explored, inhabited and colonized is one aspect of colonization, but the _other_ aspect is the migrant's relationship with the _alien_ land that he has set out to possess: does he accept his relationship with the land or does he merely use it and _discard_ it? This is the _problematic_ of assimilation into the cultural space of the land of adoption which is unthinkable for Dhanji Govindji, the first generation _migrant_, but not for Huseini, **Juma** or **Kala** and Sona who are born in East Africa and have known no other home. Huseini is driven out of his filial space by Fatima, just as his mother. Bibi Taratibu has been denied domestic space; both _finally disappear into the darkness of_ Africa and in spite of _all guiltladen_ efforts. Dhanji Govindji is unable to find them.
The boundaries of Africa for Dhanji Govindji have been limited to the places up till where his business contacts extend, the land extending beyond that was of no significance to the trader whose only relationship with the land is that of commerce, he does not wish to recognize the emotional bonding with the land that has been initiated through his liaison with Bibi Taratibu; in fact he wants Huseini, too, to forget the connection. It is only when his son runs away that he discovers the vastness and the dark depths of the land has thought he has mastered: "Africa was not as small as he had once confidently thought...One could go deeper and deeper into it and perhaps never return.” This description of the darkness of Africa which can swallow people is literal as well as metaphorical: Huseini does appear into the darkness of evil ways and association with the Africans from the inland. the ‘barbarians’ as they were called, similarly Juma spends two years of his life doing what nobody seems to know or nobody wants to acknowledge. Not only does Africa claim Huseini but eventually it saps all energy and enthusiasm of Dhanji Govindji searching for his lost son, and one day while returning from the Mosque, he is set upon and murdered: neither the murderers are found nor is the cause of the murder discovered.

Place, thus, attains a discrete identity of its own, very often acquiring the status of character, in two ways, first as having distinctive features which seem to bear down on characters, producing response that would not have occurred elsewhere; and second, resembling a human with specific features, identity and set of values. When one looks at the king of control that Africa, in its dark secret aspect, exerts on Dhanji Govindji, through Bibi Taratibu and through Huseini. it is nearly as if the land has avenged itself on him for having denied it. This dark face of Africa is also reflected in the fact that African quarters are out of bounds for the Asian boys and girls, their fear of the black magic associated with them is rampant as is seen when the children go to an African to make contact with the spirit of their father, Juma. The Africans nursed a silent hatred towards the Asians are neither the colonizers nor the colonized in Africa, but only traders/middlemen who are benefiting fully from the colonial construct. taking full advantage of the 'disadvantaged' Africans.
The historical associations of places abound and each place has, its individual history, embodied in the characters that live there or that visit, and descriptions and the broader society in which it is set. For instance, in the 1880’s the center of commerce was Zanzibar where Dhanji Govindji worked as a clerk; but from there he moves to Bagamoyo to start his own independent business at the place where expeditions halted before going further inland into Africa; and then, from there he progresses to the village of Matamu where he sets up his business in 1885. prospers and eventually becomes the Mukhi himself. The places where he stays become signposts in his personal and family history and also carry in themselves markers of the progress or decline of the family fortunes.

After Dhanji Govindji’s death, Gulam and his family leave Matamu because they suffer loss of wealth by conversion into German paper money, and they open a stall in the African quarter at Bagamoyo, which is an indication of the decline of their family fortunes, but after Gulam’s death, things start improving for the family and they move to the Indian district in Dar-es-Salaam. The narrator often refers to place before giving the story associated with it because the place embodies the story for him. In an interview given to Shane Rhodes, M.G.Vassanji says that in writing about the Shamsis in East Africa his "intent was not to write a history but to use history and see what happens to a certain group of people over a certain period of time." The narrator in The Gunny Sack refers to the ruins of a Mosque, which is now feared to be haunted and is unfrequented, but there was a time when then lived around the Mosque nine Shamsi and seven Bhatia families in communal harmony and goodwill. These ruins were the Mosque where Dhanji Govindji had prayed, just before his murder. Hence the ruins of the Mosque, as remembered by the narrator, become associated with the village of Matamu, where the family had first set roots in Africa, with the prosperity of the Shamsi clan in Matamu, and with the mysterious murder of his great grandfather.

The colourfully designed jacket of The Gunny Sack describes the book somewhat unfairly as Africa’s answer to Midnight’s Children. Thereby it does the book a gross disservice, for the reader braces himself to go through pages of no doubt
brilliant but nevertheless quite unreadable exercise in magic realism, alliterative punctuationless adjectives and all.

But fortunately, except for an occasional “prim proper perfect” or a typically Rushdian name like Roshan Mattress (for a beautiful-fat woman), The Gunny Sack steers clear of the pitfalls that may get rave literary reviews but generally make the ordinary reader wonder why he should go beyond page twenty-five.

The displacement caused by migration situates the sense of belonging to the place of origin within memory, and creates the idea of dissociation from the new home as far as the first generation immigrants are concerned; but for the second generation and later generations there is almost a biological need to orient oneself spatially, and to redefine the relationship with place. Thereby cultural identity becomes intricately woven with the idea of location. However, the African connection is something that the Asians are not able to ignore because it is intricately tied up with their personality as immigrants in East Africa. Though the Indian community in The Gunny Sack calls itself African as far as political ideology is concerned, when it comes to the socio-cultural norms it considers itself completely Indian and above the Africans. The Asian community refuses to mingle with the African community in a socio-cultural space: they cannot think of inter-marriage between the two communities.