

Chapter 4

The Murky Past: the Secretive Narrative

The Book of Secrets

“The book” in *The Book of Secrets* is akin to ‘the gunny sack’ in *The Gunny Sack* in the sense that both of them contain the past and history, though in fragments, of an immigrant community in East Africa with European colonialism and African nationalism as the backdrop. The epigraph taken from *The Ruba’iyat of Omar Khayyam* initiates the narrative with a profound suggestion that one’s past is never dead, and is always at hand in one’s present. Taking a more extreme view, one’s present emerges from one’s past, or, in other words, the past is the bedrock of the present. As such, the fragments of the history of the Indians in East Africa are contained in the personal diary of a colonial officer, Alfred Corbin, who works in East Africa during British colonialism in the region and records his keen observations in his diary which eventually falls in the hands of an Indian shopkeeper, Feroz, a former student of Pius Fernandes, a Goanese Indian, and he somehow realises its historical value and hands it over to Fernandes who undertakes to trace out the history of the diary and to elaborate the historical fragments contained in it to uncover many secrets therein. Subsequently, he recreates the past, but there remain many questions unanswered, in other words, some of the past is known; much remains utterly unknown and unknowable. This is the distinguished characteristic of this narrative of which the narrator is keenly conscious, that means this characteristic feature of the narrative is deliberate.

And, structurally *The Book of Secrets* comprises many patches and scraps of written material authored by different people at different times. This is similar to many things that come out of the sack in *The Gunny Sack*, and lead the narrator to some story of the past which turns out to be some historical incident and episode, where the personal and the communal coalesce perfectly, leaving behind no gaps of

shortcomings and drawbacks, except for some space for subjectivity and selection of contents, which falls in the theoretical parameters of historiography, as discussed by Hayden White, E. H. Carr and others. The structural aspect will be taken up later.

Taking recourse to Linda Hutcheon's *The Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*, some have discussed *The Book of Secrets* as "historiographic metafiction." For instance, Shane Rhodes in 'Frontier Fiction: Reading Books in MG Vassanji's *The Book of Secrets*' says, "Perhaps more than most novels of the growing genre of "historiographic metafiction" ... *The Book of Secrets* depicts colonial habitation as a movement synonymous with the writing of history itself" (179). The technical device I am to use here is its metafictional nature; the narrative is self-consciously incomplete, inconclusive, fragmentary and secretive also.

All the characters in the novel have the element of reserve in them. Fernandes sets out to narrate, to recreate, the past of the diary and to find out answers of many questions that the diary does not answer, and in the process reveals much of his own history; he himself shows reserve at certain places, for example; his relationship with Gregory is mysterious and cannot be known by any means.

This reserve and withholding in the texts contained in the narrative and on the part of the narrators themselves – there are many voices in the narrative – comes from within the narrative mechanism of the novel. In the 'Epilogue' the historian-narrator, who at the beginning sets out so enthusiastically to discover the past and uncover the secrets in the diary and outside it, is mature enough to realise that "everything else" cannot be disclosed. This developmental change in his understanding of the past and historiography is initiated by Feroz when he asks him, "What is history, sir?" (4), and matured by his interactions with Rita who tells him, "It's all so maddeningly

incomplete, so unsatisfactory, isn't it? Half-formed pictures, suspicions – You can't know everything about the past, can you?" (294). Though Rita puts him a corroborative question, he is not willing to give in so easily, at least on the issue of Mariamu's violation and murder. However, Rita catches him at a point, "What was between you and Gregory...only you know that. If you do" (297). As the individual is the basic constituent of community, the personal and the communal cannot be different and varied, contrary to each other. The negotiation of the personal and the communal is one-to-one and inherently essential in history shared by the greater society. And, this is why the historian-narrator fails in his arguments with Rita who outright rejects his endeavour of writing a history concerning a whole community without acknowledging gaps and the unknowable. He says, "If you cannot know these things about yourself,' she tells me, 'what arrogance, Fernandes, to presume to peep into other lives – to lay them out bare and join them like so many dots to form a picture. There are questions that have no answer; we can never know the innermost secrets of any heart. Each dot is infinity, Pius, your history is surface" (297). That is just like an iceberg floating on oceanic waters with just a small portion of its huge body showing, and the rest of it is hidden.

The "new book of secrets" (331) which the historian has written and compiled as an outcome of his research and quest for history concerning the diary is no way different from the diary itself and the outer frame of the narrative in the sense that all of them are incomplete fragments revealing some and withholding much, resolving no issues to absolutism, thereby failing to pin down truth. The narrator says about his compilation,

In a short while, a man will call to pick up this package of material – notes and scribblings and research I have put together for Rita. It is, as

she put it, “everything else,” everything I have written and compiled in relation to the diary – what I have come to think of as a new book of secrets. A book as incomplete as any book must be. A book of half-lives, partial truths, conjecture, interpretation, and perhaps even some mistakes. What better homage to the past than to acknowledge it thus, rescue it and recreate it, without presumption of judgement, and as honestly, though perhaps as incompletely as we know ourselves, as part of the life of which we all are a part? For Rita, then, all this, to do with as she will, to bury it if she must (and if it will allow her). (331-32)

Set out to recreate the world of the diary, to “construct a history, a living tapestry to join the past to the present” (8), Fernandes ultimately comes forth with one another book of secrets, “incomplete as any book must be.” Following the long and secretive trail of the diary, he realises that incompleteness, speculation and personal interpretation are inherent in his book and narrative, and the outcome is a compilation similar to Corbin’s diary. It is also established by historical theorists, like Hayden White and others who stress the subjective and selective nature of historiography along with gaps in it. And, above all, the point is that the narrative is conscious of it.

There is much withholding committed by the characters. Corbin, Fernandes, Mariamu, Rita, Gregory, Pipa, the mukhi, Ali Akbar – all show a secretiveness and reserve. This is what Fernandes tells about Gregory, “There was a certain secretiveness in him, a reserve; there remained sides unrevealed, a trait I attribute to national character” (268). Although Fernandes is Gregory’s friend, he does not know anything about his relationship with the Corbins until he discovers the letters of correspondence between them. He does not know that Gregory is homosexual, as

assumed by his students, and cannot say anything about his own relationship with Gregory. And, if Gregory is homosexual, how can his intimate and secretive relationship with Anne Corbin be explained? Gregory's reserve attributed to his national character is reflective of the reserve in the Indians of East Africa as observed by the Africans. This reserve becomes one cause of the failure of the relationship between the two races. Alfred Corbin, the colonial administrator who observes very keenly, cannot see every detail, and there are worlds beyond his reach. Corbin goes to find out the source of drumbeat that disgusts him at night and finds out a new way of life. The narrator says, "And yet the drumbeat in the night.... There were layers of life here clearly inaccessible to him, deliberately hidden from him" (77). How much is observed by the colonial administrator? And, how much is understood by him? He and Mariamu come up with those bits of their past that they can understand. Mariamu is generally silent and mysterious. At many places, especially to Pipa and regarding her relationship with Corbin, she does not say anything. And, as Corbin observes her, she is hard to be understood for her behaviour is complicated with no definite patterns in it. There is some eeriness and obscurity around her character. Even Pipa, her husband, finds her mysterious; and she suffers for she remains silent. This reserve in her is the greatest riddle in the narrative. It can be read as a text in the context of what is revealed in the narrative. This issue will be taken up later. In his letters to Gregory, Corbin shows a secretiveness, a reserve, in his neutral language. The narrator says in this regard, "In his letters to Gregory, Corbin shows the reserve we have come to expect of him; yet I wonder if behind the neutral language in a letter, almost exclusively about Mariamu, he hides any feeling for her. About the loss of the diary he appears almost indifferent ... " (325). If this very letter is exclusively about Mariamu, why has it not been incorporated in the text? And this reserve of Corbin

prevents Fernandes from knowing anything more about Mariamu's relationship with Corbin. Ultimately it is the narrative that withholds truth.

Pipa is also secretive. The narrator says about him after his death, "In death now, as he had in life, Pipa eluded his questions" (312). Much of the narrative is about his secrets, wherein a secretive relationship is formed between Mariamu, a half-caste girl of Indian or Arab and African origins, and the colonial administrator of Kikono, a town where mostly Indian immigrants live, Alfred Corbin; thus, a virtual relationship is formed between Pipa and Corbin. However, no one knows the real nature of Corbin-Mariamum relationship. Perhaps it is Mariamu's step father Rashid who gives wind to this sort of relationship; and his own dealings with Mariamu are not clear – what evil deeds he makes her do?

The war-torn country engulfs Mariamu also. She becomes a victim of it either because of her beauty or because of Pipa's doings across the border in German East Africa. But it is not known who murders her and for what reason. Mystery shrouds her killing utterly. Strangely enough, there is no way within the narrative by which this murder is investigated and made known. The narrative manages to keep it a secret for the Indians do not seek an investigation, as they are peace-loving and not revengeful.

Rita is deliberately and knowingly secretive. She expresses a reserve very clearly on certain matters like, "And what about the Falklands, Rita? Was this the Argentinian connection through Rosita, some service rendered in the war? She declines to comment" (292). Rita clearly tells Fernandes that everything cannot be known about the past, and she does not tell him much about Ali's meetings with Corbin in England. She also cannot help find out the real father of Mariamu's son.

She knows that the past does not go without affecting people's lives. She tells Fernandes, "Of course, the past matters, that is why we need to bury it sometimes. We have to forget to be able to start again" (298). Unlike Fernandes who aspires to dig up the past, she realises that it must not come between human relations and must be buried. That is why Fernandes recognises her as the heir of this past, and hands over the diary and other documents of Gregory which are of historical value to her to deal with them wisely – to be buried. It is the emergence of these objects, like Corbin's diary and Gregory's correspondence, that the past comes to the fore. So such legacies of the past which function as fossils of archaeology, suggestive of history and historical changes, ought to be buried, as Rita does.

The narrator has "incomplete thoughts, half explanations" about his last days with Gregory (311). When he learns from Rita that Gregory is homosexual, he becomes afraid of his relationship with him. However, incomplete thoughts and half explanations do not make issues clear. They make a murky image of matters in hand.

Many characters have their secrets, and the narrative is clear on this issue. Rita relates her story to Fernandes, and at one place she tells him, "Should I be telling you this – a family secret?" (287). That is the secret of their success in London. About Gregory, the narrator says, "I did not quiz him about his poetry, and he was grateful, doubly so when I did not let anyone in on his secret" (275). In the beginning part of the narrative, while tracing out the history of the diary, Fernandes learns much about the people's lives associated with it. He says about Pipa, "In the weeks that followed I discovered the dark, passionate secret of a simple man whose life became painfully and inextricably linked with that of an English colonial officer" (8). These secrets and silences create gaps in the narrative, and form the unknown territory of the novel's

world. The fragmented structure of the novel and its characters' argument that everything cannot be known about the past give full validity to these unknown areas.

The narrative is excessively conscious of the darkness of Africa, and there are several references to it. While entering the interior of Africa, Corbin describes it as "the huge and dark continent" (23). The narrator says about the African nights and Corbin, "The nights were cold and dry, the blackness so absolute, so palpably dense he felt that if he reached out a hand from where he slept he could pull it aside and let in the lighted world of London, Paris and Hamburg" (52). Just a little later, he says, "He had heard of spirits resident in mbuyu trees and naturally had ridiculed the idea, but in this menace-filled darkness, in this loneliness, all one's scientific objectivism seemed vulnerable" (52). At yet another place, the narrator says, "...after all this the African night seemed as tame as it could be made" (63). There are some more places where darkness is referred to, like:

1. This instant darkness descended from the heavens (67).
2. To add to Corbin's sleeplessness that night, a drum started beating in the dark somewhere ... (69).
3. Only when he looked directly above him did this darkness seem to have any limit... (76).
4. How to explain my reason for being here, leaving that fairyland to come to this darkness... (80).
5. Then she took the water and threw it out at the back of the house in the dark (83).
6. The ADC had learned to gauge the depth of the night's quiet by the clarity of its non-human sounds... (87).

These references are mainly contained in the portion wherein colonialism is described in East Africa. In this portion of the narrative, Africa is presented as ‘heart of darkness’ where mysterious things happen with the fall of the night. Stylistically, there is a parallelism in this darkness in which unknown things happen which create a sense of fear in people and the secretive and silent behaviour of the narrative. It can be said, the darkness extends to the narrative, and as the darkness is characteristic of Africa in the sense that it is beyond one’s knowing and knowledge, so withholding and silence make certain portions in the narrative that are not accessible to the reader. It is these secrets and silences that create an atmosphere of mystery and eeriness in the narrative.

However, finally, no narrative is secretive. A ‘secretive narrative’ is a paradox: Vassanji’s narrative withholds much in secrets and silences. But, when narrative is read as theme, these silences function as text and are complimentary to the meaning formation. The basic preoccupation of Vassanji is to recreate the life that his community lived in East Africa; to relive that past. In ‘Prologue’ the narrator gives the basic framework of the narrative:

In the weeks that followed I discovered the dark, passionate secret of a simple man whose life became painfully and inextricably linked with that of an English colonial officer. I saw that the ephemeral tie between them – the tragic young woman Mariamu – would become the most tenacious bond of all. I saw an old uncertain world give birth to a new, not less fragile one, and I followed the trail of this book, from the pen of a lonely man to the obsession of another, from ancient lives caught up in imperial enterprise and a world war to these, our times: and

finally to myself, and the hidden longings of my past. At the end of it all, I too lie exposed to my own enquiry, also captive to the book.” (8)

The world that Vassanji delineates is complex and complicated with multiple displacements, the historical phenomenon of colonialism in East Africa and the World War One, and most importantly the racial interactions in Kenya and Tanzania along with the local politics. Partial truths and silences create gaps in the narrative which make space for varied histories. As with Shane Rhodes, Vassanji makes it clear about *The Gunny Sack* and *The Book of Secrets* that “each book is just one construction of history” (108). He goes on to say, “In *The Book of Secrets*, this is *my* book of secrets with the emphasis very much on *mine*. It is not only history filtered through one person but history as seen at a certain time. If a person were to construct a history at two different times in his life, he would end up with two totally different books. You see, history is very much an accident of time and person” (108). In such a mechanism of historiography, historical truth cannot be pinned down to a specific point. Consequently, clear cut judgements cannot be passed regarding the Indian immigrants in East Africa, so to say. As such, the past must not prompt an apocalyptic situation in the immigrant’s life – the political situation that is described in the later portion of the narrative. This is how the narrator renders the situation:

Images of death come, now, and quite naturally so, with the recollection of an event that came to symbolise for so many the death...of a dream, a hope, a way of life. Nineteen seventy-two saw the ruling party’s socialist policies reach their climax in the nationalisation of rental properties. Those – mostly Asian – who had erected two-storey buildings as monuments to the labours of their families, who staked thus a claim in the country they had made their

home, whose one investment was in two or three flats they would rent out, saw their hopes dashed in a betrayal of the faith they had in the country. Savings of a generation, two generations, were taken away.

(311)

In the stylistic whole of the narrative, the fragmented structure with gaps, silences, unresolved issues and narratives cut short to hold back truth are appropriate to the immigrant's predicament, and his world abroad where he faces a severe crisis of identity and belonging as well.

The effect of this secretive nature is that one cannot know the past completely, so the truth evades one's observations and investigations, and one cannot pass judgements upon others and cannot fix them in a certain position to hold them responsible for the circumstances emerging and arising from that position. That is perhaps why Corbin's own observations are not absolute and he cannot understand the real and true nature of Mariamu who remains an unsolved mystery which the narratives refuse to resolve, as they are inherently incapable of it. As such, the incomplete past, unknown history, cannot be held responsible for the situations that come at the end of the narrative.

If Fernands's history is surface, so is the narrative. But the important thing about the narrative is that it acknowledges this epistemological fact and derives its strength from it. Ambiguity and suspense emerging out of withholding and reserve shown within the text as stylistic devices, and by most of the characters, make the narrative powerful, and it remains inconclusive and settles no issues even at its end. It thus grows outside its textual parameters.

Pius Fernandes, the main voice in the narrative, is a former teacher of history; and his former student Feroz thinks it appropriate to hand over the diary left behind by Pipa, as an evidence of his obsession with Mariamu, to this very historian of the Indian immigrant community in East Africa. Most possibly, Feroz also has some inklings of the historical value of the diary, and, at first, he puts Fernandes the question, “What is history, sir?” (4), then takes him to see the 75-year old diary, one of the documents that Fernandes terms as “relics” (5) of the past. About such documents, the narrator says, “In the last decade and a half, many relics saw the rubbish piles of this city, as people in a frantic rush to seek a new life abroad thought little of throwing reminders of the old one away” (5). This very reminder of a life lived in a distant past and giving people of the present times a continuity with those in the diary activates the historian on his vocation. Yet another question Feroz raises, “Is it important, sir?” , and goads the historian in him as he realises fully its historical importance, and in the fashion of a historical scientist sets out to discover the past of the diary and the people associated with it or mentioned in it (5). So the narrative begins in the fashion of a quest, a research for the past, and certain people, like Rita and Sona, help the historian through witnesses and documental research done in libraries abroad.

When Fernandes has gone through the diary, he understands that it can function as a fossil in archaeology, suggestive of the past it has witnessed. He says, “I would – I told myself – recreate the world of that book. I would breathe life into the many spirits captured in its pages so long ago and tell their stories; and I would revive the spirit of the book itself, tell its own story. And so I would construct a history, a living tapestry to join the past to the present, to defy the blistering shimmering dusty bustle of city life outside which makes transients of us all” (8). As such, his

endeavour, as a result of his longings for the past, is to construct a history, in his point of view, to join the past to the present, to negotiate his identity and belonging.

Alfred Corbin, a colonial administrator posted in Kikono where mostly Indian immigrants live, is the voice in the diary. He observes the people around him and records their character and life in his diary. The narrator says about the diary, “The diary in my hands was a record of an early posting, one forgotten fragment of an addendum to a well-documented history” (7). This fragment raises some questions and leaves them unanswered. Fernandes, the historian, undertakes to resolve these issues, and in the process realises the true nature of history, the question put by Feroz: “What is history, sir?” and the way the historian works. This point will be taken up later. The point under consideration is the authenticity of the diary as a source of history, and in this connection it can be said that such diaries written by the Europeans in Africa during colonialism are regarded as genuine sources of history and are a pretty vast field of historical research.

There are references to the Indian indentured labour used to construct railway lines in Africa, and the coolies who were taken away by lions at Tsavo. When the *mukhi* of Kikono tells him about their sojourn in Africa, he says, “Already we have contributed to the Uganda Railway” (50). This is a historical fact that Vassanji takes recourse to to justify his peoples’ claim on the land of Africa. This issue is elaborated in *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall*. On reaching Mombasa, Corbin sees hides of lions in Maynard’s office, and they become immediate reminders of the past when Indian coolies working on the railways were preyed by lions while constructing a bridge across the Tsavo River. The narrator says,

...you might be told by the barman that this lion had carried off twenty-seven victims in Tsavo: a coolie from an open railway carriage; an unknowing porter from a campfire away over a four-foot fence before his companions discovered him missing, the following day finding his bloodied clothes, some bones, and a severed head; a sleeping labourer dragged out from between two oblivious companions inside a tent...and so the bloody till went. (17-18)

Obviously enough, Vassanji invokes history, especially the Indians' contribution to the construction of Kenya-Uganda Railway, to make genuine his claim on Africa as 'home'; that is clear from the way the past is remembered and rendered. Some critics, Godwin Siundu, Peter Simatei etc., have subverted his claims and the invoking of history on this issue. This point will be discussed later.

This history of the Indian immigrants in East Africa is constructed with colonialism, German and British, and World War One in the backdrop. The Indians in Kikono are British subjects belonging to the Empire; they live there with the protection of the imperial forces and are well adjusted in the colonial order. Spread of the war to the colonies, giving in of the German forces after tough combats and resistance and the taking over of the German East Africa by the British are historical facts making the historical content of the narrative. But the important things are the effects of the war on the Indians. They get displaced; their economic conditions dwindle though some earn much in these hard times. They find themselves between the devil and the deep sea. Some get hanged as they are charged with spying for *the enemy*, strangely on both sides of the warring armies. The tragic point is that they cannot decide upon their enemy in this war. On both sides of the border are people of their community. So the *mukhi* of Kikono opts to be neutral. Nevertheless, the uncertainties of the war affect

Pipa adversely enough to change his world altogether. He is coerced to spy for Maynard; and Mariamu, his wife, is murdered.

And, for the historical investigation of Fernandes, the war leaves numerous scars on the land, remains and debris of towns torn down in the fighting, and remains of an old brick wall, one of the emplacements for the machine guns. The narrator gives an account of his visit to Taveta, “The town at the edge of a desert that during the war had to be crossed to recapture it” (175). Though the manager of the hotel tells him, “My friends, this place is full of history” (175), the narrator earlier laments, “But there is no sign of the war here, no sign of the past. History drifts about in the sands, and only the fanatically dedicated see it and recreate it, however incomplete their visions and fragile their constructs” (175), and a little later he cries, “Does anybody care about the history, I ask: does it matter?” (177). That is the passion of the historian.

There are some references and allusions to some historical events and personalities in the text. For instance, “the Rebellion of Bushiri bin Salim” and “the Maji Maji uprising” are mentioned in connection with the brutality of the Germans (113). About a rebellion against the British in Kenya, the narrator says, “Times were moving fast for all of us. In Kenya the Mau Mau war was on, and there were fears it would spill over into Tanganyika. We had a labour union now, and political parties were in the making. It was a time of considerable confusion” (264). Here, the narrator alludes to the Mau Mau and the fears associated with it. At yet another place, there is a reference to the Zanzibar Revolution, “The time was 1963-1964; there had been a violent revolution in Zanzibar in which the Arab monarchy was deposed ...” (289). Also there is a passing reference to the Falkland war (292). Idi Amin is also mentioned (290). These allusions open debates and discussions on certain historical

events and incidents that took place in Africa, and take the narrative to the political domain. Much of Vassanji's writing revolves round these events, together with Africanisation of economic sources in Kenya and socialisation and nationalisation of private properties in Tanganyika. Idi Amin's turning out of the Asians from Uganda as the 'final solution' to the Asian problem is part of the reconstruction of his communal history

There are a number of dates and years mentioned in the text. For instance, 1988, 1980, 1971, 1966, 1920, 1972, 1937, 1935, 1950, 1958, 1987, 1981, 1964, 1960, 1959, 1923, 1916, 1904, 1912, 1914, 1913. Whether these are accurate or not does not matter; they certainly heighten the historical dimension of the narrative. It does act as a historical record with days, dates, events and people in it.

One major aspect of recording history in the narrative is the history of the diary itself. There are explicit indications of this history in the text. In the 'Prologue' the narrator says, "There was, I felt, much more there than the contents of its pages; there was the story of the book itself" (7). This story is not contained in the diary, however, it is there with the diary, and is no less important than its contents. Rather, it is more interesting for the historian has to do some research for it. The narrator says about the diary, "...it must have left a long and secretive trail, a trail that if followed would reveal much about the lives and times it witnessed, and tell us why the diary finally surfaced where it did" (8). So following the trail of the book, much history is exposed and discovered, and one unusual thing happens in this case that the historian himself is exposed to his own enquiry and is "captive to the book" (8). That is because this is as much his personal history as it is communal. That way, the book captures not only the dead but the living also. That way, it is a link between the past and the present, whereby a continuity of time is established. A greater part of the

narrative lies outside the textual parameters of the diary. There are only 22 diary entries spread in 80 pages, and most of them are very small, and just a few too lengthy to be contained in a diary-page. The point is that the textual area of the contents of the diary is very small, much smaller than the rest of the narrative. However, in Alison Toron's words, "The diary is a narrative device that forms the impetus for the story; the "story of the book itself" (7) is a crucial aspect of narrative momentum" (Refusing to Tell 8). The diary raises many questions and answers none. The narrator enumerates these questions:

What are we to make of Bwana Corbin's denial of involvement with the girl Mariamu? What became of her in the years that followed? What evil acts did her stepfather, Rashid, purportedly able to communicate with lion spirits, make her commit? How did the diary leave the Englishman's hands? How many times did this diary change hands before landing in mine now? What of all those people whose lives it touched? (91-92)

The history of the diary is not contrary to the history of those people whose lives it touches; rather the two go together, most importantly in case of Mariamu. The two histories – of the diary and Mariamu – superimpose on each other, and when seen closely, they appear to be one. The narrator says about Rita's dull sense of history, "And if not for the re-emergence of the diary, I'm thinking, you would not have had to deal with that past, would you, Rita?" (296). The re-emergence of the diary is akin to the surfacing of the goddess of history amid those people who have forgotten their past in their fast life. In other words, the diary is history. And, the diary "misse[s] the fate of the numerous pieces of paper that wrapped spices or started wood fires," and is not thrown away like other relics of the past, instead, is deliberately saved, because

Pipa is excessively obsessed with it; he finds his Mariamu in it (5). He associates himself so closely and passionately with it that it replaces Mariamu for him. The narrator says about the diary and Mariamu, "...Mariamu – who stole the Englishman's diary and like that book refused to lie buried" (293). Rita admonishes to bury the past; the diary and Mariamu refuse to lie buried. Mariamu is the present for Pipa; she is with him, watching and observing him. The narrator says about such nature of Mariamu, "Yet she was not only a voice, an image in the past. She spoke to him in the present, as when she said, 'Oh, but how easily men forget. You are happy now'" (217). In other words, the diary, history and Mariamu are on the same plane acting on the same axis. All the three are similar in nature; they are reserve at places, withhold some and do not answer many questions which always remain there.

The narrative is consciously historiographic. In the course of extending the history contained in the diary, Fernandes realises the way the historian works and the true nature of history. As the diary entries fall short of answering many questions, he writes in his personal diary about his passion of finding out more, "But the story doesn't end here, of course. Questions remain. Like a snoop I must follow the threads, expose them in all their connections and possibilities, weave them together. What else is a historian but a snoop? But, no, the urge is stronger. Like a blood-hound I will follow the trail the diary leaves. Much of it is bloody; it's blood that endures" (91). Though the things that he investigates concern him also, he begins dedicatedly to follow the trail of the diary. He knows "The diary is not a voice in the wilderness. There are witnesses" (92). That way his historical research begins; he visits historical places and searches written documents in libraries. He interacts with people who share this history, and realises the past is always joined with the present. Rita, who is his connection to the past, makes him realise the true nature of history and the need to

forget the past to some extent to begin anew. Agreeing with the historian on the importance of the past, Rita tells him, “Of course the past matters, that’s why we need to bury it sometimes. We have to forget to be able to start again” (298). The past must not come between people. That is what happens to Pipa in relation to his son Aku. They do not come closer for the past stands between them. And, about his relationship with Gregory, Fernandes says, “There were worlds yet that embarrassed us, histories that irked, that we would not rather discuss” (275). When he learns from Rita that Gregory is a homosexual, he starts to be indifferent to him. The need to bury some of the past is taken up in some other novels, like *Amriika* and *No New Land*, also. While trying to peep into others’ lives, Rita catches Fernandes and tells him, “You can’t know everything about the past...” (294). This happens because the past is murky, and some of it remains always hidden and unknown, inaccessible to the human hand. The book of history is incomplete, containing “half-lives, partial truths, conjecture, interpretation and perhaps even some mistakes” (332). Yet Fernandes, the historian, reconstructs the past to rescue it, to acknowledge it.

This history constructed by Pius Fernandes inherently refuses answers to many questions that it itself raises. This mainly happens because the history so constructed is a result of negotiation between the personal and the communal. The narrator is not unconscious of this literary fact. He says, “First Rita, then Gregory, they have entered my narrative, unasked, so to speak. I began a history with an objective eye on the diary of Alfred Corbin, ADC, DC, one of the architects of Indirect Rule, later Governor – and so on. I saw myself as a mere observer, properly distanced by time and relationship, solving a puzzle. Now, strangely, I’ve myself drawn in, by a gravitational force, pulled into the story” (233). Starting with an objective eye on historical facts, the historian’s subject does intrude into the literary artefact. What

finally comes to us is historical investigation and research filtered through his subject; the traces of his subject are all along there. Naturally, and on its own, though quite surprisingly for the historian at first, the personal finds its way into his historical research. Earlier, he says, “I wonder at this intrusion of the personal into my research” (97) when Rita shows interest in the diary; later, he realises he too is a captive to the book. And, it is because of this subjectivity in historiography that there are dark areas which are beyond our knowledge, for “we can never know the innermost secrets of any heart,” and, consequently, Rita tells Fernandes, “... your history is surface” (297). As Vassanji himself says to Shane Rhodes, “All experience becomes character and narrative; everything gets put on the page” (110). And, at the same time he acknowledges that “Fernandes ends up looking at much more” than the diary (110). With Chelva Kanaganayakam, Vassanji says, “My characters don’t mean anything until they have a history” (24). And some of his characters cannot shed history, eventually; they stumble against these obstacles and do not move forward in their relationship with people and surroundings.

This negotiation of the personal and the communal, the past and the present, determines the immigrant’s identity and belonging. In Africa, and also in England, he is to be conscious of his identity. The narrator says about Dar es Salaam, “It mattered who you were, where you belonged; you were your tribe, caste, religion, community” (133). As such, one forms and works out one’s identity and belonging through connections and affiliations which are traced through discovering the past to join it to the present. This is what the narrator says about a photo shown to him by Rita, “There’s no past in that photo, nothing that I recognise. For that there’s Rita, the link” (231). The discourse contained in the photograph does not connect him to the past. He recognises his place through Rita. And, Rita says about Ali, her husband, “I am his

Indian connection – that’s why I am here. The community approaches him through me” (232). Acknowledging the past and history is ultimately to discover and own one’s identity and belonging historically. That way one traces one’s course in temporal terms to work out one’s *being* and *becoming*.

Almost all of Vassanji’s fiction is of political nature. Colonialism in East Africa and the close alliance of the Indian immigrants with the colonial order, together with many stereotypes and preconceptions associated with the Indians, and their behaviour toward the Africans, culminate in adverse political conditions for the Indian presence in East Africa after the region gains political independence. In Tanzania, the old structures are dismantled; patterns of social, economic and political life get changed suddenly and disturbingly for the Indians. Socialist policies of the new regime do not go in favour of them. This is what the narrator says about the new order, “...the boards containing the list of all the former graduates of Boyschool were taken down – in the cause less of egalitarianism than of erasing an irksome past. We lived in cynical times then, when the Party youth wing, the Green Guards, in the manner of Mao’s Red Guards, bullied people in the streets and sought control over their lives” (307). In a sense, the history of Pipa is the history of the Indian *dukawalla* in East Africa. The narrator delineates how he establishes his Pipa Store through sheer hard work and patience; how extremely difficult times he goes through. With all that suffering and patience, he is regarded as *miser* and *dirty*. This is how the narrator describes him,

...a plump wheezing man in singlet and loincloth inside a produce shop, perched atop a tire-seat in the middle of all his wares, his fingers constantly at work folding and refolding squares of paper into packets of spices, dropping them in one fluid motion into a basket at his side,

measuring time as it were with grains of turmeric, coriander, chillies.... A man with a reputation for stinginess, dirtiness of his store and person, the shadiness of some of his dealings.” (3-4)

This Indian *dukawalla* endures the uncertainties of the war, a nowhere position where he has no choice, and hardships of the place; and somehow accumulates his savings to invest them in the establishment of his Amin Mansion, which is taken away by the new regime. The colonial order gives him opportunities to flourish, and the new order makes way for his degeneration; and the *duka*, its institution, goes the chaotic way of African politics.

The social structures of “the way of life” of the Indians established and flourished in the colonial order are subverted and dismantled to make space for a new socialist society. In these strong winds of change, the Indians are the most fragile and vulnerable. They do not stand the effects of these changes, and yet another dislocation takes place. With the changes in political ideology of the dominating forces, the settlement of the Indians in Africa dwindles. Colonial ideology favours their settlement: socialist ideology dismantles it. In this regard, the narrator says,

In those years, under a socialist regime in the country, I saw the values that I had brought with me and inculcated with such ardour in the school become increasingly out of place. Mediocrity was the new order, and ideological correctness. The new generation of students who came were sent by a government seeking bureaucrats, not, as in the past, by a community eager to get ahead in the world. The Shamsis who had built and run the school as the pinnacle of their ambition, now in large numbers began to pack up and leave for North America. I saw

my best students come to say goodbye, never to return. And, one by one, almost all of my fellow expatriate teachers left also. (314)

Change in social values is most obvious in case of Gregory, the teacher. The new regime does not make much of the institution of teacher. Gregory is made to do menial jobs; and when he dies, he dies an ordinary death, not known to many. In life also, in his later life, he feels extremely out of place in a place that he has made 'home' wholeheartedly. The egalitarian Utopia gives him a sharp feel of a chaotic Dystopia.

The Empire, with the Queen as its symbol, is like the mother's lap for these immigrants in East Africa. They identify themselves so enthusiastically with it. With the winding up of the imperial influences in East Africa, an acute crisis of identity emerges in the Indian community. Chaos and confusion prevail and bring in uncertainties and apprehensions. The group stirs with panic, and those of its constituents that are capable again attach themselves to the Empire – they dislocate from the periphery to be relocated in the center, as they cannot belong to the new order. Fernandes says,

We were intensely aware of our essential homelessness. Our world was diminishing with the Empire. We were all travellers who had on an impulse taken off, for all kinds of personal reasons, yes, but surely also to pursue a career we had all chosen – to teach. And we were all proud of our best efforts. We were now aware that we would have to choose: to return home...but what was home now? to take on a new nationality...but what did that mean? to move on to the vestiges of

Empire, to the last colonies and dominions or perhaps to retreat to where it all began, London. (274)

With the colonial ideology, which is capitalistic in nature, in place, the Empire is home; and with the coming of socialistic ideology, the essential homelessness of the immigrant comes to the fore and he sees his world diminishing; yet he has to choose between going closer to the center of the Empire with moving on to its vestiges, and making directly the original attachment with the center.

It is “due to European intervention” (34) that the Indian settlement of Kikono, which can be extended to all the Indian settlements in East Africa, is set up; and “[p]owerless though the individual Indian is beside a European...” (49), as is observed by Corbin. The Indians consider themselves as British subjects, and the colonial government is *their* government.

Some critics who have critically evaluated and appreciated Vassanji’s works hold their views in African perspective. They find in his narratives colonial discourse; and his invoking of history is established as undermining his claims for Africa as ‘home’ on the grounds that the Indians are closely associated with the Empire and its enterprises.

Godwin Siundu is of the opinion that

Unlike many other groups, the East African Asians find themselves in a situation where invoking history is more likely to undermine than strengthen their claims to East African countries as homes. Partly, this is due to their perceived privileges during colonialism which is essentially pegged to their contribution to the entrenchment of colonialism in the region. But it is also because of the shifting meaning

of home as defined and understood by the majority of East Africans, those widely seen as indigenous to the place. In other words, the East African Asians' claims to the region as home are subject to the policies of marginality and centrality, as well as to other related forms of dialectics. (15)

Citing the origins of East African Asians and their collaboration with the imperial and colonial forces in the region, to substantiate his arguments, Siundu subverts their claims. He reinforces his arguments with definitions of nation and nation-formation and conceptual connotations of migration – migration as reconstruction of home.

Peter Simatei takes up the racial differences and cultural identity maintained by the Indians, who are as racists as the whites. They derive their cultural identity from India and associate themselves with the Empire, hoping to pursue their career in the west, to sustain a sense of superiority. Khanoum, the *mukhi's* wife of African origins, is ruthlessly ignored and neglected by the Indians after her husband's death. Almost the same treatment is given to other African women in Vassanji's works. The Indians form a closed *micro-nation* whose parameters are determined by communal belonging. Simatei says, "Asians become susceptible to 'hate politics' because they are unable to really identify with the political processes of nation formation. Their aloofness does not only contribute to their marginalization, it also problematizes their allegiance to the new nation" (34). Simatei holds that this aloofness is because of the economic system based on the *duka* and a "clientele religio-cultural mode," a socio-cultural institution built around the *mukhi* and the mosque (35). While maintaining cultural purity and racial superiority, the Indians build barriers of alienation which eventually pushes them to the extreme margins where they cannot hold their presence

as they find their earlier position out of place in the new order and get dislocated to the space that gives them the feeling of being at home.

The point is that Vassanji invokes that history which somehow does not help him to “reclaim” Africa as his home. However, by reconstructing it, he acknowledges it. And, there is an inherent urge in the narrative to bury the past to get reconciled with one’s world. Fernandes, the historian, reiterates the need to have historical sense in his people; Rita admonishes to bury the past and not to disclose all of it. And, finally, Fernandes withholds some history about which he says, “What I can never disclose, give to the world, is mine only in trust. The constant reminding presence of a world which I created, a history without the relief of an outlet, can only serve to oppress. And so I have decided to relinquish it. Only then can I begin to look towards the rest of my life and do the best with the new opportunity that has come my way” (331). He withholds to *forget*. Simatei writes, “In both *The Book of Secrets* and *The Gunny Sack*, Vassanji is not only interested in retelling the past but also in the way that past is remembered, or in the form it takes as memory” (29). Remembering is the way of invoking history; forgetting is to bury it. It is not to run away from history, but to face it and not to let it place obstacles in one’s way.

To reinforce the historical phenomenon of racism in the form of cultural purity and racial superiority, the narrator employs what can be termed as linguistic and semiotic elements of colonial discourse. This attitude of the narrative is strikingly more explicit in its earlier portion in which the African is presented as *savage*, essentially capable of being a servant and slave, very likely to commit brutal acts like, butchering a man and deserting the caravan in the forest in the midst of nowhere. Frank Maynard is presented as the antithesis of African savagery. He speaks in clear terms about the African behavior and the adverse changes which a civilized man from

Europe acquires in his nature while living in Africa among the *savages*. His character reflects Joseph Conrad's Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness*.

This is how Maynard justifies his brutal killings of the natives:

“Imagine”, he said, “the center of the village where they hold baraza. Cleared hard ground. A white man – an Englishman – pegged to the ground. Lying on his back, mouth wedged open. Savage men and women come and urinate in his mouth. Men standing and laughing, women crouching, all drunk on pombe`. The man drowns in nigger urine. He is disemboweled, used as a latrine.... Imagine the insects feeding on him...the stench...the scavengers...hyenas who would not leave a scrap of meat on a bone, vultures, crows. It had to be avenged, Corbin. For the white man, for authority, for order – they are the same thing here.” (21)

The white man is authority and order, and the native is subject and disorder. Maynard uses epithets like, “nigger” and “savage” very freely and frequently for the African. He kills them not because they are easy to kill as they are powerless, but because he believes they are as lowly as animals and deserve to be killed ruthlessly for their savage doings.

Governor's Memoranda also contain colonial discourse in the mode of ‘the white man's burden.’ They regard the Africans as people who have not reached a high stage of civilization. And, it is felt the duty of the white man “to lift the natives to a higher plane of civilization...” (31). This opens a discussion on evolution of man, and the development of his cognitive abilities. The African lags far behind; and being inferior – uncultured and uncivilized – he is to obey the authority of the white man,

and, above all, adopt his *civilized* behavioral patterns, and learn them by living close to him, though as the servant. In case of the Indirect Rule, the Governor's Memoranda give directions to the colonial administrators not to "enforce blindly...all orders issued by these men [the native chiefs] who, after all, are only savages" (32). The policy of the Indirect Rule is actually politically motivated and fully in the interest of colonialism.

Alfred Corbin also believes the African way of life to be exotic and alien. His bent of mind is Orientalist though he shows some sympathy for the African. He does not say in clear terms the truthfulness or the opposite of his Indian servant Thomas, instead invokes Rudyard Kipling, saying "East is East...," to show his hidden feelings of regarding the East as uncertain, mysterious and unpredictable (46). Or, to complete the quote, "East is East: West is West. The twain shall never meet." Describing the Africans and the Indians in a gathering, listening to a speech at the Club, he says, "The servants and the Indians at the back gawked" (194). It is obvious that the servants are not Indian; they are African. The famous means of travel in Mombasa is the gharry – "a tram running on rails and pulled by one or two natives" (16). The natives are as lowly as animals and can be used to pull trams.

The most striking aspect of this colonial discourse is the influence of the African "savagery", "dark night", its "noises", mystery and loneliness and exotic African cultures on the white man. It is Frank Maynard who reiterates this in the fashion of Kurtz who dies a savage. The narrator says about Maynard's attitude toward Africa, "He loved it and he hated it, above all he feared it for what it could do to him. 'This is a savage country, and it could turn you into a savage. It is so easy to be overcome by its savagery, to lose one's veneer of western civilization'" (20). He kills the natives to show strength and fury, for he believes "This is a savage country, it

makes a savage out of you” (21). Taking African women to kill loneliness is a common phenomenon in Vassanji’s works. They are given a very demeaning treatment.

Almost all of this colonial discourse is in Fernandes’s voice, except for the memoranda. The point is that whether Fernandes is rendering the colonial consciousness of the Europeans. Whatever, this colonial discourse augments the historical phenomenon of colonialism in Africa.

However, Peter Simatei gives reference of Edward Said’s phrase “a library of Africanism” with respect to Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, and says,

While not intending to reach similar conclusion, I will claim that similar strategy is operational in Vassanji’s representation of pre-colonial and colonial Africa. This may be deemed a necessary strategy here, for after all, is the writer not merely trying to reconstruct that primal moment of colonial insertion into the African terrain through the eyes of Mr. Corbin, an agent of Empire? The ideological implication of the strategy cannot, however, be missed since there is a textual tendency to uphold as dominant Mr. Corbin’s perceptions and reconstruction of reality in which racial relations are comprehended in hierarchical terms. (33)

If that is so, Vassanji acknowledges lowliness of the African in his reconstruction of history also. As such, his reconstruction is in consonance with the colonial ideology. Dan Odhiambo Ojwang also evaluates images of the African in East African Asian literature. He also finds Vassanji an orientalist.

This representation of the African in pre-colonial and colonial periods of history reinforces and strengthens the authenticity of the behavior of the Africans toward the Indians in post-colonial period. The ‘savage’ must not have been trusted by the ‘peace-loving’ Indians, and now the result is betrayal and racial discrimination. This is what the African leader tells Pipa, “...you know, Pipa, come independence and we’ll send you back where you come from” (276). There appears to be a continuity of African “savagery” to postcolonial period. The narrative is witness to such a behavior of the Africans. And, if the colonial discourse is just false knowledge about the Africans, the racial discrimination and political betrayal in the postcolonial period is real and experienced. That, in a sense, authenticates and corroborates the colonial discourse also – the Indians also know that.

This is in a way political manipulation of history. Pre-colonial and colonial history corroborates postcolonial history and vice versa. As such, the reconstruction of historical reality gets reinforcement from as imaginary and political images as colonial discourse. In the earlier part of the narrative the ‘civilized white man’ is engaged with the ‘savage black man’, lifting him up to the higher stages of civilization, and the Indian immigrant is supposedly occupying a neutral position, which actually is the political strategy to take advantage of the status quo, for it is colonialism and its aggressive forces that give protection to the Indian immigrant from the savagery of Africa. And, in the later part of the narrative, when the colonial order is gone, the African is engaged with the Indian making him a helpless victim of acute racial and ethnic discrimination on political levels, and even brutality and violence as depicted in other narratives like, *The Gunny Sack* and *Uhuru Street* also. The point is, the effects of “racial revolution,” political independence, in Africa upon

the Indian immigrants as depicted in the narrative uphold the images of the African established in colonial discourse in pre-colonial and colonial times.

Vassanji renders a murky past, a history that does not resolve all the issues that it raises. It also seems that the writer is not so much interested in writing a history as he is in presenting the effects of history – some historical and political events, incidents and decisions – upon the Indian immigrants in East Africa. However, the point to consider is, is all the past murky? With Shane Rhodes, about the character of Pius Fernandes as the filtering consciousness of the narrative, Vassanji says, “It is not only history filtered through one person but history as seen at a certain time” (108). Regarding history as “an accident of time and person” (108), Vassanji acknowledges scope for different narratives in the sense that ultimately there is no history, but narrative. Subjectivity and selection of historical events in the narrative are determined by the immigrant consciousness of Fernandes, and the effects of colonialism and colonial order on this consciousness are explicit, not so difficult to locate; he finds the values established by the colonial order out of place in the new order. Subsequently, the narrative withholds much about the Indians’ way of life; what the Africans do after independence is clear and certain. In fact, Vassanji conceals some facts about the Indians, pushes them to the background, and highlights some historical phenomena to make the black African appear blacker. Ojwang says in this connection,

In spite of the fact that overt violence against the diaspora occurs in large scale in Zanzibar alone, and that the act of expulsion happens in Uganda only, Vassanji’s protagonists in mainland Tanzania live in chronic fear of violence and dispossession. That East African countries were interlinked in crucial ways is of course without reproof; what is

striking is the way the Shamsi protagonists write off in their minds the obvious differences between the countries. In their scheme, Julius Nyerere's reformist line is no different from the violence of Okello's Zanzibar and the militarism of Amin's Uganda. (54)

The narrative has an inherent tendency to persuade the reader not to make absolute judgements about the Indian immigrants to make them victims of bloody revolutions and political policies like, Africanization and nationalization. It also withholds, conceals and erases some historical truth about the African to present him barbaric and untrustworthy. This tendency of the narrative can be attributed to the sense of essential homelessness in the immigrant, which prevails and predominates his consciousness after the loss of Empire-as-his-home. He feels not-at-home, insecure and uncertain, and is apprehensive of what Ojwang terms 'the black peril and the violation of a colonial Arcadia' (54). The deliberate course of historiography in the narrative is, thus, informed by the immigrant's consciousness – the immigrant whose origins are in India, connects himself culturally to India, finds home in colonial Africa, and is rendered homeless with multiple dispossessions and dislocations because of communal clashes back in India and racial discrimination in Africa. His are the immigrant experiences informed by cultural differences and colonial history thereby negotiating a world that suspends for a moment his homelessness, and the changes in this world prompt him for dislocation whereby he rejects it to seek yet another home. And, thus, he maintains his essential homelessness. He has, thus, formed an apocalyptic vision of immigration, denouncing all forces and factors which violate his Arcadia. This sort of vision is highly reinforced by the deep and strong feelings of essential and perennial homelessness which he attempts to compensate with tracing his self and origins historically.

Structurally, the narrative comprises fragments and patches of textual elements and Fernandes's research and compilations. The nucleus of the narrative is Alfred Corbin's diary of which there are twenty-two entries, beginning on 2 March 1913 and ending on 24 June 1914, covering some fifteen months of his colonial service in East Africa, and spreading in the first eighty pages of the novel. Though Fernandes's narrative begins in 1988, the diary takes us back to the colonial Africa and World War One, leaves us mid-way; after that Fernandes's research on local history takes us to the times of political crises in the region. There are three textual pieces of Governor's Memoranda, four appendices, two colonial letters, one paper cutting, three love notes, six entries of Fernandes's personal notebook and eight letters – three written by Fernandes's former student Sona, and the other five are a correspondence between Gregory and the Corbins. A prologue, an epilogue and some epigraphs are also there.

These documental records of colonial history in East Africa, Fumfratti's narratives, Frank Maynard's narratives, Rita's narratives, Gregory's bag containing the debris of a life, and Fernandes's findings form a montage of historical phenomena when these bits and pieces are connected together; a sort of history is obtained. These pieces function as metonymies and suggest a larger history of the sort. The narrative is itself witness to this fragmented structure. Fernandes says, “‘If you cannot know these things about yourself”, she tells me, ‘what arrogance, Fernandes, to presume to peep into other lives – to lay them out bare and join them like so many dots to form a picture.... Each dot is infinity...’” (297). By joining many textual patches, the narrative is formed to reconstruct a history that if evaluated in Rita's perspective is just surface; there is a huge body of history which lies buried unknown. That much we know is a part of it. So, it can be said that Vassanji himself acknowledges inadequacy of his history reconstructed.

There is a good number of Indian and African words and phrases in the text. For instance; Indian words: *avatar, bhajan, biriyani, bhang, channa, dhol, dhoti, gyan, jiv, mandap, namaste`, nika, paisa* et cetera.

African words: *wazee, ugali, shetani, pili-pili-bizari, mzee, mshairi, kofia, mbuyu, mzungu, fisi, duka, askari, baraza* et cetera.

This is cultural hybridity on the linguistic level. The Indians speak some of Swahili, but they, in the main, maintain their cultural links with India. Racism and racial discrimination are manifestations of culture being a site of struggle. Godwin Siundu says, “Indeed, if Moyez Vassanji’s novels firmly fit in the wider postcolonial discourse, it is partly because they ‘negotiate the powers of cultural difference’ from the pre- to postcolonial East Africa, in an environment where talk about *nationhood* is quite often followed by a reinvention of *micro nationhood* that is essentially exclusivist” (15). Cultural groups contest for domination and result in varied cultural dominions in the colonial period; and the Africans are at the pinnacle with their racial revolution of independence, and let down other racial and ethnic groups. The whites even demand self-government, and the Indians are in their way. It is a fact that different groups are identified with their cultural affiliations. And each culture is attributed with a feeling of superiority or inferiority. The whites are at the summit; the blacks occupy the bottom; and the browns come in-between – this is the colonial order. After independence, political policies are designed keeping in view the indigenous races, not caring for others who are excluded from this nation-building.

The narrative contains Swahili words to appropriate the idea that it is close to Africa. It is a narrative strategy used to subvert the exclusivist patterns of the Black society. It can heighten the colonial images of the African as “savage”, suggesting

him to be unable to incorporate other cultures for he has “not reached a high stage of civilization” (31). Riddles make the narrative more complex on stylistic and semiotic lines. Fernandes says about the war, “For many people this Great War, the war of the Europeans, was a great riddle composed of many smaller riddles; it came unasked for, undeclared in their midst...the telling of the war was often the telling of riddles” (109). Riddles are not so easy to solve and they confuse man. They are uncertain and withhold knowledge. There are three riddles in the war history associated with fighting and use of weapons. They create a sense of mystery and awe about the war among the immigrants. For them, it brings uncertainties and disturbs their peace for it is nothing to them, yet they are caught in it. Kikono is deserted – all leave but the *mukhi* and his wife. And, no-one knows where it settles. Riddles heighten the immigrant’s predicament and bring shades of obscurity to his world.

There are multiple voices in the narrative: Corbin, Fernandes, Rita, Gregory, Anne Corbin, Fumfratti and Frank Maynard. The point of view shifts and shuttles between the first person and the third person. Similarly, the past tense, at places, gives way to the present tense. There are multiple narratives within the narratives. Some of magic realism is also there, especially in the portion associated with colonial history, and in connection with Mariamu. These narrative strategies used upon a fragmented narrative are suggestive of the complexity of the world depicted. It is intrinsically complicated and the life experienced there gives rise to an equally complicated narrative.

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