

Chapter 1

Revisiting Home(s) in Africa

The Gunny Sack

MG Vassanji anthropologises and personifies the gunny sack. He compares it with the Arab princess Shehrazade, giving it a personality of its own. It has the potential of telling tales night after night, and thus sustains its life; narrating tales of the 'small overseas community' becomes its breath and heart beat; so narrative is vital for the sack which is the central metaphor of the novel. Eventually, the gunny sack becomes a character, rather a narrator, and is recognised one among many voices in the novel. In fact, it is so close to Ji Bai that the two superimpose, or the sack replaces her as a narrator. Its being so central, alive like a character, a participating narrator, stresses the point that the sack is well present one among so many in the novel. It is not in the background, or dead like the past, and it is not distant and apart also, but has affinity with the descendants of Dhanji Govindji and is an integral part of the community.

However, it has been neglected and betrayed by some. Perhaps it is too heavy to be taken along. But the narrator has undertaken the job of listening to it; in this way the sack becomes the narrator and 'the narrator' the interlocutor. This gives the sack a more active role and the narrator a passive one, which in turn intensifies the effect of the past. The sack 'tells tales that have no beginning or end' and keeps the narrator awake and imprisoned in the basement of the western metropolis through the second migration. It proves the sack to be more powerful, effective and capable of pricking, awakening and sensitivising human consciousness. But how does it do it all? Through narrating tales night after night; through spinning out yarns which make the warp and the weft of the gunny.

The act of telling is central to the mechanism of the novel. Or, precisely, telling is essential and prerequisite to this novel. It is through telling that the gunny sack postpones its demise. That means there is a death in the background which is certain and can strangle the sack as soon as it stops telling. That way the central figure around which the whole novel rotates is living by means of telling. Or, in other words, telling is central to the novel. Narrative is as much important to the writer as it is to the novel. As Rosemary Marangoly George hints at the implications of writing immigrant fiction in *Politics of Home: Postcolonial Relocations and Twentieth Century Fiction*, she refers to Kincaid's *Lucy* and writes, "At the end of *Lucy*, however, the young woman protagonist begins to come to terms with her "homelessness" through the act of writing" (197). Vassanji does the same through writing narratives related to his past and the past of his community. He just recreates, revisits and reclaims his homes at different locations in India and Africa.

The novel is in the tradition of oral story telling. An old granny narrates the tales of her past and the past of her concern to her grandchildren or descendants who are not so much interested in her tales. First, they have not experienced it all, so they do not have an emotional affinity with it. Secondly, they are in a new world, a modern world, those tales of the stale past don't interest them. However, the narrator is one who is ready to listen to her; he listens to her quite awake and the past is relived in his unconscious. He recreates the world gone behind; relocates his home in East Africa. The old woman has the past integrated in her personality as empirical knowledge. She has it in the deep recesses of her unconscious, and it comes to the surface bit by bit.

It is a blend of oral and written traditions, old and modern, African and European. But what actually is the gunny sack? At the beginning of the narrative and in the first line of its final chapter the narrator refers to Ji Bai as describing memory to

be the gunny sack. “Memory, Ji Bai would say, is this old sack here . . .” (3) and “Memory, Ji Bai said, is this gunny sack . . .” (266). This memory finds its way in the telling in a subjective perspective. This subjective touch to the telling makes it lyrical, and may be sublime. What I mean to say is that the telling contains experiences and feelings, a recollection of the past through a wave of feeling and pain at the loss of something the narrator had affinity with, like home, nation, identity and roots. Peter Simatei contends about Vassanji’s fiction: “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). So the way the past is remembered, preserved in the dark recesses of the unconscious, is an important parameter of Vassanji’s fiction.

The novel takes the form of oral history: as the gunny sack is the deep recesses of Vassanji’s unconscious and events, anecdotes and experiences of the past come out of its dark corners. It determines the structure of the novel also. In a way, the novel itself becomes a gunny sack – both the sack containing the past and the sack the narrator. The reader gets the history of the Asians in East Africa as the novel imparts and renders it. So, the perspective through which we get the history is typical to the novel. The things and inheritance that come out of the sack infuse and invoke the past in the narrator’s mind, and he sits down to recollect it like a poet in Proustian mode. And, according to Peter Simatei, the pattern of the novel reflects the complex relationships of the events and characters remembered; disparate characters that compete for attention as the cluttered objects in Ji Bai’s gunny sack trigger a flood of memories of equally fragmented experiences.

Actually the pattern of the novel implies the complex relationship between the past and the present; there is an historical distancing, and Vassanji while living in

Toronto, a new world, a new home, has to rebuild his old home to which he has affinity only in memory and dormant unconscious. As such, remembering in Proustian mode frees him of the difficulties of reliving the past in so much an historical distancing; he catches the past in fragments which are not so coherently related in causal and temporal terms. Thus the telling becomes atemporal, though related to a specific space – ahistorical history of the Asians in East Africa. The contents of memory are atemporal. Where the narrator begins and where he ends do not matter. Does he really begin at the beginning? No, he actually begins at the end – the death of Ji Bai, the small overseas community as remembered in his memory. In a sense, memory is the beginning, the source, the way and the end. It is all contained within him. The home he has rebuilt to reclaim is actually imaginary. So, the novel neither starts nor ends. It is a point, a dot in the narrator's unconscious. The events and experiences we get in *The Gunny Sack* are one entity, memory; and when this memory is poured out, it flows as telling of tales, thus narrative.

The narrator says about Ji Bai, “We buried Ji Bai a few weeks ago on a cold November afternoon.... From near and far, young and old, they came to see her go, in this small overseas community. Not that many here knew her or had even heard of her; she was only passing through, a traveller” (3). Though Ji Bai has died in the same overseas community, how could she be a mere traveller, only passing through? What could have been her next destination? Here actually the narrator refers to the community itself that had migrated from India, and had to flee from Africa to Europe and North America. So, Ji Bai as a mere traveller stands for the whole of the small overseas community, and as such, her unconscious is the collective unconscious of the community. Ji Bai does not seem to be so important and prominent for she was not known to many. But she is one of the many voices in the novel. And, her unconscious

is the source of the telling and the tales. The point is, the narrative seems to be personal unconscious; it also is collective unconscious. So it is personalised history of a community. About the fragmented nature of the narrative, the narrator says: “Wisps of memory. Cotton balls gliding from the gunny sack, each a window to a world.... Asynchronous images projected on multiple cinema screens.... Time he is not the continuous coordinate . . . but a collection of blots” (112). Memory and retrospection thus become the technique of the novel, and the structure emerges from them. In an interview with Susheila Nasta, Vassanji relates some information about the making of the narrative:

To me the gunny sack was just memory and when I began writing the novel, I had a very romantic image of a person weighed down by memories, which is what I felt I was. And, at some point I was looking for a way to deal with that past and that past to me was just a bunch of memories, very discrete memories that interlinked and combined in all sorts of ways. (71)

Vassanji empties his sack of memories all through the course of the novel; and as he sees the past as a bunch of memories, the contents of the sack are memories also. What we finally understand is that memory is important in the novel as for both the past and narrative are concerned.

The gunny sack is perceived as feminine. It is conceived as female. The narrator compares it with the princess Shahrazade who tells tales night after night; defers her own demise; keeps the narrator awake and imprisoned in the basement, thereby, ultimately recreating the past of the community. With Nasta, Vassanji shares, “...at some point I felt a tremendous sense of loss at being away from the place I grew

up in, and what I did was try to recreate the life that we lived . . .” (70). That way the gunny sack is inseparable from Ji Bai. Both of them superimpose as narrators and voices in the novel. The gunny sack contains the fertilised zygote of the past experiences of the community and acts as a womb. At proper time, in the basement of migration, away from home, the foetus is delivered as the recreated life, identity and origins of the community. Thus, the gunny sack gives birth, rather rebirth to the community. Though the narrator wishes to end this cycle of death and rebirth, the sack gives rebirth to him. Is this rebirth a suffering?

This association of the sack with mother figure is prominent in the novel, for fathers die or escape and mothers carry on in the world. Females are important in the novel, so is the gunny sack. Vassanji has given so much importance to the feminine principle. It can be said that he wishes rebirth after every death. And, the cycle of death and rebirth will continue. The novel is a recreation of the life the community lived, so a rebirth.

About historical sense and one’s urge to know one’s past, one’s aptitude to trace out one’s roots and origins, with Nasta, Vassanji says: “I think all people should have a sense of themselves, a sense of where they come from, and it just happens that people in East Africa – I think Indians as well as Africans and especially in Tanzania – don’t have that sense, of where they come from” (70). Being away from home (Africa), Vassanji develops an historical sense, affection and affinity with his past. It can be nostalgia, a feeling for the past experiences. Or, it can be an inner urge to dig out his roots and origins. Whatever, the point is, where does he find and locate his past? The past emerges and springs out of his own dormant unconscious. So, the past is stored in his own being, in the dark corners of his unconscious. As such, he cannot escape from his past, and roots, whether he is in the basement or anywhere else. The

past is already in his self; he is himself history. He only unfolds what is already enfolded in him. As such, memory has epistemological value in this novel; it is the source of knowledge. The narrator says about his remembering, “Cotton balls gliding from the gunny sack, each a window to a world . . .” (112). These ‘wisps of memory’ open windows to many worlds; each object that comes out of the gunny sack invokes the narrator’s memory of some past incident or the tale associated with the object. When the narrator enters these worlds one by one, he reaches nowhere, for it is his own self, he finds his own self. That is why finally the objects lose their importance and it is the gunny sack that becomes again the all-important entity. It is the creator of his self, precisely, it gives rebirth to his self. So, he cannot escape the cycle of death and rebirth. And, Miss Penny Mrs Gaunt’s exhortation: ‘Begin at the beginning’ comes true, for the narrator goes about to search his self in his own self; he begins his voyage in the sea of his own unconscious.

The gunny sack has been employed as a technique to give a suitable structure to the narrative that is fragmented and episodic like dots and blots. Vassanji comments about the technique and structure of the narrative in the text itself at some places. In an interview with Chelva Kanaganayakam, he says about the mechanism of the narrative: “I got the idea of taking things out of a gunny sack and letting them be used as minor themes in which the major theme could be developed – that theme being the history of a people and the growth of a young boy into a young man. This was done with the gunny sack as a central image” (23). As the history of his people was ‘a bunch of memories’, ‘very discrete memories’, it had been difficult for Vassanji to organise these fragments of experiences that would surface his unconscious asynchronously and randomly without any regard to time. So, the gunny sack provides the appropriate technique to assemble these fragments and render them

not knowing what will come out next, what the searching hand will get to. The sack just keeps the experiences together and prevents them from dispersing.

The past is so fragmented mostly because there is historical distancing and Vassanji draws it out from the depths of his unconscious. And, different and discrete things invoke discrete events and incidents associated with the objects in him, for each object opens a window to a world, so each object has a world of its own. All these worlds are contained in the gunny sack.

At the beginning, the gunny sack is important for it contains the objects, and when the sack is emptied of its contents, the objects speak for themselves, they become important and the sack goes into the background. At the end, the sack emerges again to take them inside so that they lose their individual importance and become one as the history of the narrator's people. And, the narrator says at the end of the narrative, "Memory, Ji Bai said, is this gunny sack...." The past indefinite tense of 'said' indicates that the telling has finished, so has the search for one's past.

The gunny sack contains the narrator as he contains the gunny sack. The sack is his unconscious; he finds his self in his own unconscious. He says about his characterisation, "... because the stories I tell always begin somewhere else. Just like myself. So you can never tell a conventional story. My characters don't mean anything until they have a history" (Kanaganyakam 24). Just like Vassanji who began in India, and through many lands of East Africa reached Toronto, his characters have a past, and in their past he locates his own beginning, his roots and identity. He is actually in search of his self.

Vassanji always locates his self with respect to his 'home', his belonging – the place he belongs to, whether it is India, East Africa or finally Toronto. It is the gunny

sack that creates these 'homes' for him. "... it is the memory, the imagination that is important" says Vassanji to Nasta (71). As the imagination is important, so the imaginary nature of the things it creates is also important. It can be because of nostalgia or that historical sense that Vassanji imagines of his roots in India and Africa. His historical sense is actually his sense of belonging for he is extremely subjective. "... I don't have a neutral voice, an objective voice . . ." says Vassanji about his stance in his narratives in an exchange with Nasta (71).

Who is the real heir to the inheritance of the gunny sack? Certainly not all of Vassanji's community, for it is he only who has that historical sense. The historical legacy of the community is entrusted with the person who cares for his past. "... this old sack here, this poor dear that nobody has any use for anymore" (Vassanji 3). So, Salim Juma alone inherits the sack, which comes to Salim after (through) the death of Ji Bai, and to Vassanji through a sense of loss; so ultimately, Salim alone bears the burden of this sack. As such, the novel reflects the effects of history upon the narrator, and is a result of those effects. Vassanji recreates his world in India and Africa, or he builds his imaginary home through memory and retrospection.

Does it mean it is only through the sense of loss that Vassanji could write this novel? The inheritance of the gunny sack is bequeathed to Salim only after Ji Bai's death, the inheritance could be transferred only after her demise, and the sack is essential for the narrative. This is how the sack is kept with the narrator: "You used to sit before it so long, she thought it should be yours" (Vassanji 5). The inheritance is decided on the basis of closeness and affinity, otherwise the sack is thought to bring ill luck. Salim has been close to the sack. The predicament of the community in Africa and subsequent migration to North America can be Ji Bai's death. This forced mobility created that sense of loss which gave rise to the historical sense, which in

turn culminated in the novel. By writing the novel, Vassanji has shown the cycle of birth, death and rebirth; there can be reconstruction only after destruction. And, Vassanji recreates through memory and retrospection. Loss of one's culture is the death of one's unconscious; or the remains of one's culture smudge in one's unconscious.

Vassanji has brought story, discourse and structure on one plane. He has story already in his mind. He just finds out a suitable structure to fit it. Here, the gunny sack is both a metaphor and a technique. So, the required knowledge, discourse and structure originate from a single point. The gunny sack as metaphor becomes history as metaphor. It becomes the image of the past which leads to the idea of the present.

The story, discourse and structure don't intersect. They function on the same axis. The fragmented past is presented through memory-bits as different things come out of the sack at different times evoking the history associated with each of them, and, thus, the plot, whatever there is, forwards corresponding to the story. The action continues to shift from place to place, as the community is on the move out of compulsion and urge. The time isn't one continuous coordinate, but splits and dots. So is the experience of the immigrants – fragments and shreds of an overseas life, at strife, culturally, socially and politically; so are the events and story. The novel does not have organic unity in its plot; rather the plot remains subsidiary to the characters whose history and personal experiences are prominent. And, all this appears to be natural and apt for things come out of the gunny sack randomly. So, the gunny sack gives Vassanji a good opportunity to escape the restrictions of the narrative. While interacting with the past or even encountering it – he encounters it in his own being while locating and redefining his identity and roots – his point of view is personal and subjective, so is memory.

Memory cannot be a reliable source of knowledge, and history. Though Vassanji has used some historical facts and events, in the world of the novel it is all that is remembered and stored in his unconscious; and there can be much more that is forgotten. The contents of the unconscious are extremely personal and subjective, and cannot be regarded as objective and neutral. However, Vassanji's concern is not history – history as knowledge and information – he isn't a historian, but a novelist. He says in this context in an interview with Shane Rhodes: "I don't see the novels as capturing African-Indian history. I just wrote the novels to investigate certain aspects of the life that I knew. The intent was not to write a history but to use history and to see what happens to a certain group of people over a certain period of time" (117). History is not the end; it is the means to go beyond historical facts to the personal feelings of characters; to investigate certain aspects of the life of the Asians in East Africa as Vassanji himself knew it.

Using history with imagination and personal musings in subjective perspective solves the problem of the epistemological limits of historical knowledge. Whether the details are authentic or not, isn't important; it does not matter whether the events and time correspond to history proper. Instead, Vassanji's personal views and understanding of the happenings, as rendered through the narrative, matter. This is how Vassanji renders history through his characters: "Each of the novels forefronts a narrator so as to indicate that this "history" you are reading has been focused through a certain individual prism; in this way, for me, the process of trying to understand the past, of featuring characters who are in the process of reconstructing it, is an important part of my fiction" (Rhodes 117). Vassanji is reconstructing the past of each of his characters which reaches to us through the narrators, who themselves belong to the community and take part in this history. This way the understanding of

the past becomes a subjective reality – an internally situated and formed plane of action. As the characters have themselves taken part in this history, the telling can be relied upon as far as the world of the novel is concerned. The characters reconstruct the past as they perceive it. Their perception determines authenticity; we can say Vassanji feels history, and makes his feelings history. The novel goes from memory to recorded history; from oral tradition to academics, which in turn is a passage from African tradition to European one. E. H. Carr writes about the historical facts so much discussed in theories and philosophies of historiography, “It was, I think, one of Pirandello’s characters who said that a fact is like a sack – it won’t stand up till you’ve put something in it.” Though Vassanji has not used the metaphor of the gunny sack keeping in view Carr’s philosophy of history, quite accidentally the two overlap. Vassanji has put his own perception and point of view in the sack of the history of the Asians in East Africa to see how it stands and how it looks like.

As such, here history becomes memory which goes through Vassanji’s unconscious to be recorded as history of his people. However, the first history and the last telling are different. The last telling gets filtered through Vassanji’s subjectivity and is rendered in a definite perception and perspective, and has very different effects and aims to get at. It is not for the purpose of facts and information; may be the facts can be wrong or not so well said. If the recorded history and the contents of the novel are different in epistemology, that difference is meaningful. It is in that difference where Vassanji lies, where he can be located. For instance, his attitude toward the British colonialism is supportive, or he gives an inferior image of the Africans, or he never mentions the economic exploitation done by the Asians and their superior attitude toward the Africans. Why does he hide some knowledge and bring forth some in particular? This is a politics of writing. So Vassanji puts in the sack his own being,

his own subjectivity to make it stand. The sack does not get so exposed as his own feet.

Godwin Siundu has analysed Vassanji's *The Gunny Sack* and *The Book of Secrets* using Rosemary George's book *The Politics of Home: Postcolonial Relocations and Twentieth Century Fiction*. Referring to George, he writes, "Homes are not neutral places. Imagining a home is as political an act as imagining a nation. Establishing either is a display of hegemonic power" (15). He goes on to say that George points not just to the political links between homes and nations, but also to the fact of emotional investment as central to imagination of either or both. According to him, as he has read the novels within the matrices of nation as home, "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"(15). So, Vassanji's recreating home in East Africa is itself a political act, and he has politicised history to do this. Siundu traces the origins of the East African Asians; according to him, ". . . the historical fact of imperialism, in its manifestation of indentured labour and colonialism, can be viewed as the single most important factor that caused the influx of South Asians in East Africa on a massive scale" (16). As is hinted at in Vassanji's works, South Asians worked as indentured labourers to lay railway tracks in Kenya and Uganda. Besides, as described in *The Gunny Sack*, it was because of some other factors also that the Asians left for Africa; like, communal tensions back in India.

India was only beginning to feel its seams. It was due to community conflicts, with origins in that conversion some three centuries before, that my young great-grand-father Dhanji Govindji, sporting an umbrella, a new turban and new leather shoes, but otherwise quite

undistinguished, left Janapur early one morning on a bullock cart on the road to the harbour town of Porbandar. (Vassanji 7)

Community conflicts and economic opportunities in Africa mostly prompted the Asians to go to Africa; this immigration got impetus from the Indian Immigration Act of 1833. Whatever may be the causes and reasons of the Asian presence in East Africa, the Asians in these countries did play a role in African politics and economics. According to Siundu, “the completed railway line provided Britain with a key tool with which to assert their political and economic hold on the region, and at the same time promised brighter economic prospects for the Asians who had taken part in its construction” (17). Whether the Asians were part of the process of colonisation in East Africa or not, but they were surely on the side of the coloniser.

Ji Bai dies in some cold weather of the North, not ‘there’, but ‘here’. These adverbial elements show displacement, estrangement, loss and a sort of diasporic nostalgia with pain (*saudade*). It can be the cold November of Canada, but not the moderate climate of the African coast or hot harsh climate of the interior. The narrator says, “We buried Ji Bai a few weeks ago on a cold November afternoon . . .” (3). At another place, he says, “Come, come ... what if she had died there? Would you have posted it? But she died here” (5). The vision, perception and sense of belonging of this overseas community have shuffled from ‘there’ to ‘here’. They find themselves between these spatial adverbs lost in the movements of migration and displacement. Their feelings and unconscious are split between these terminals. Their ‘there’ is identified with reference to ‘here’. When they migrate from India to East Africa, India is their ‘there’ with respect to Africa as ‘here’. And, ‘there’ (Africa) becomes a signifier for Africa when they get to America and Canada; ‘here’ becomes a signifier for a new place of settlement; so the place they leave behind will always give way to a

new place of settlement. In every place they have to develop relationship with it, and with displacement and further movement the relationship turns complex and complicated, not only displacement, but arrival also affects this relationship. So, the complexities actually begin with those communal conflicts in India which make Dhanji Govindji leave behind India; indentured labour and free migration backed by imperialism of the Western powers also contribute to these complexities. The point to consider is that these complexities of relationship between a newly settling people and the place they have settled are rooted in history. History as knowledge and history as cause, both ways influences the perception of people, thus shaping their behaviour toward others.

Vassanji has shown how their 'here' keeps changing to 'there', and how their relationship with these spatial adverbs becomes complex with racial discrimination and prejudice.

This 'here' and 'there' aren't just linguistic units, they carry politics of nation and home in them. They have a history of their own; they have a specific history, a common and shared one. As for the shared history, they imply diaspora and displacement. 'There' isn't everywhere, it cannot be. It is somewhere with which one's past is associated and identified. It is somewhere which is only in one's memory and cannot be now accessed as before. So 'there' becomes history, past, a far distant spatial and temporal entity, the contents of one's unconscious, memory and nostalgia. 'There' is definite, a known place; 'here' is unexpected; it develops from 'somewhere' which lingers between 'nowhere' and 'where?'

'here' and 'there' are very complex constructs. They need to be explored with the help of history and different points of view. They carry within themselves politics

of home, displacement, loss of identity, nostalgia, cultural conflict, linguistic and cultural hybridity, racial discrimination and colonial experiences.

The distance that is inherent in 'here' and 'there' is also complex in nature. It is distance from one's roots, origins and identity; it is the loss of one's culture and home – the things one associates one's self with – so in a sense, it is the loss of one's self. This shifting and shuffling results in ambivalent affiliations, and one finds one's self finally 'somewhere' between 'here' and 'there', which virtually comes to 'nowhere'. It is from here that existentialism and pessimism which are seen in Vassanji's fiction originate. It comes out and Vassanji cannot deny it.

There are a lot of things and factors which transform 'here' into 'there'. All those things have got place in history; so the effect of history is that it transforms 'here' into 'there' not only in terms of place and time but also in the unconscious of the people. The people get socially and culturally alienated, and intellectual or mental migration leads to physical migration. Certain factors, like 'Africanisation', lead to alienation or mental distancing which gives way to actual distancing, and is followed by historical distancing as far as the narrative is concerned. The question, 'Where do you come from?' has a counterpart 'where are you going to?' – Africa, North America? Somewhere Then 'Where do you come from?' – India, Africa, Canada? Somewhere....This is corresponding to 'here' and 'there'. Loss of one's home and culture, confrontation with a new culture and environment and the difficulties in making it yet another home, make one conscious of one's roots and origins, one's identity and self.

The common opinion of the community is cynical of its history. The people don't find anything good in it, for it has brought them bad luck. So, the people don't

wish to preserve their past. This is what they have to say about their history, “It has brought nothing but bad luck, they say. They want you to burn it, once and for all to bury the past” (Vassanji 5). But, has it really brought them bad luck? Where does this cynicism come from? It is perhaps an outcome of forced migrations and the adverse political decisions taken after the political-cum-racial revolution with which the colonial order was disrupted and the Black power emerged with full force. This cynicism prevents them from recording their history, from telling their own tale, so it is the obstacle to narrative. But the narrator develops affinity with the past which becomes his ‘seductive companion’. He rebuilds that past and recreates that home, that ‘here’, there in Africa. That way the present and the past go in a dialogue; they overlap, and finally the past becomes the bedrock of the present.

Salim does not burn the gunny sack to bury the past once and for all, but he opens it, and out of its gaping mouth come out various things which lead to their history. His community is desperate and disappointed. The gunny sack is the inheritance and legacy of the community. Though Ji Bai has preserved it, after her death, the community is cynical about it. The sack opens its gaping mouth, and never shuts it, for it gallops, swallows in the people who peep into it; readers get involved and engaged with it. That mostly happens because it is a novel and not history proper.

Names are important and complimentary to the themes and structure of the novel. They act as fossils which lead to knowledge of the past. They give identity and location to people and things. They take one to one’s roots and origins. About names, the narrator says, “You can place the names of succeeding generations in a column and visualise the crazy dance of history; the logic behind the made parade of names...with a hundred years jingling between them – each new variation and fashion in name signalling a new era, a new beginning” (10). Dhanji Govindji, the name,

shows cultural hybridity – both Hindu and Muslim. It gives one clues about the Hindu past and conversion to Islam, and carries both the worlds in it. There is that cultural displacement, and eventual ambivalence evident in it. But the dropping of the last name shows some of the past can be shed, new trends and tendencies can be adopted. However, the gunny sack is still covered with the dust of Kariakoo.

The shedding of the past itself is the past, the process of evolution, change and the beginning of a new era. It is certainly history through loss of traditions and customs. It is more objective in inferring the past than the gunny sack itself, which is intensely subjective. Perhaps, here Vassanji fails to make a difference between history and inheritance of traditions and customs. The name Dhanji Govindji doesn't have the 'attak', the last name, with it. The narrator says:

But Govindji, the elders will now tell you, is not a family name – where is the attak, the last name, which can pin you down to your caste, your village, your trade? Absent, dropped by those to whom neither caste nor ancestral village mattered any longer...thus the past gets buried, but for my drab, my sagging ugly Shehrbanoo, from which the dust of Kariakoo has not been shaken yet. (10)

I don't think the past gets buried by dropping one's last name or changing it. Instead, one's roots and origin get shrouded and obscured; the past is always there. The present form and structure of a culture can be new, but it will certainly have a past. So, by the past, here, Vassanji means one's ancestral traditions and customs. With cultural hybridity, they will surely change and may even get lost. And, these names do show cultural hybridity. First, accepting the Islamic culture along with the Hindu culture would lead to this cultural mixing; secondly, being in the contact zone with

African and North American cultures would enhance this mixing, take it to language and many other dimensions, thus widen its parameters.

It is Vassanji's childhood teacher Miss Penny who makes him conscious of his roots and tells him to 'Begin at the beginning' (6). So, it is his contact with the outer world, the new world, that he becomes self-conscious and undertakes to dig out his roots which locate in India. About the three structural parts of the novel, Vassanji says, "Every part is a focus of a certain period in history and that made things easy" (Nasta 75). The first part 'Ji Bai' is pre-natal as for the narrator Salim is concerned. It takes the reader to India where the roots of the community lie. The second part 'Kulsum' covers the narrator's early childhood. And the last part 'Amina' is concerning his youth. In the fashion of *bildungsroman*, the novel describes the narrator's development as a young man.

The novel in a sense shows how the hopes of the community get shattered in India, and then in Africa. First in India, the tall bearded-man, Shamas, sings songs of hope and promise to them; they get lured and are converted to an esoteric sect of Islam. He tells them to wait for a saviour. When the saviour fails to arrive, because of communal conflicts their ancestor has to leave for Africa hoping he will get good economic opportunities there in Zanzibar. Here emerge the existential problematics in the text. It later turns to cosmic irony when Vassanji relates it to history.

What the historical event of conversion leads the community to are conflicts and subsequent migration. Why does the saviour fail to arrive? Who can he be? No one knows. Besides, the historical phenomenon of imperialism also facilitates them to go to Africa – their prime motive can be economic opportunity, to work as indentured labourers and traders.

But also it is Shamas who converts them to the Solar Race; gives them a prominence and distinction in India, and then eventually in Africa where Dhanji Govindji thinks to be superior to the African 'slaves'. However, Vassanji has tried to Africanise the community, to make its relations with Africa much strong and deep.

Dhanji Govindji is given Taratibu, a slave, to take care of him, and to keep him warm in cold nights of the Africa. Here cold weather produces means of warmth and dehumanises the African woman to a 'warmer'. It finds its equivalent in 'bushman' of arid climate of the desert Africa. However, the Indian and African blood mixes, and Huseni comes into being. Huseni is the product of miscegenation, and his feelings are with his African mother; he 'forever stalks the forest in search of himself' (40). He finds his identity in his chocolate skin, dark forest and black Africa. He is shown wild and raw as though he is the child of the forest itself; he runs away to the forest as naturally as the forest is wild. His 'savagery', 'primitiveness' and 'rawness' are his distinctive traits as though inherited from his mother. Huseni is the grandfather of Salim the narrator. Salim Huseni Juma is both an Indian and African name. It incorporates both the cultures. It also echoes the history of this cultural hybridity. As for the context, the Africanness in it is more important. Here, Vassanji traces his roots in Africa, rather reclaims his Africa through his lineage.

But Salim Juma and Huseni are different as for the African roots are concerned. Or, at least they are given different treatments. Huseni's being African is in racial terms; Salim's being African is in regional (geographical) terms. Huseni seems to be a mystery. Indians call Huseni a 'half-caste', and Africans call Salim Indian. So Salim is Africanised Indian.

In this novel creative history and written reference are complementary to each other. Creativity makes it a work of fiction which can give it multiple dimensions and widen its parameters in literature. Written reference makes it a subjective voice with the history of the Asians in East Africa in its background. Vassanji says about the importance of research and written reference in his novel, “. . . the research that I did for a few years is very much part of this book; so even though the novel talks about the imagination and creative history, it also has depended on written reference” (Nasta 77). There are some historical events in the novel: the rebellion of Maji Maji in Tanganyika, the World War One, the Mau Mau in Kenya, the World War Two, and most importantly Colonialism in East Africa. Almost the entire novel is narrated with colonialism in the backdrop. The rebellions, pre-independence struggle and post-independence political developments are related to colonialism in one or the other way. But the point to consider is how the community is affected with this historical phenomenon. Colonialism gives the Asians opportunity to settle and thrive in East Africa. It makes way for their migration and doing trade there in Zanzibar, Coastal Africa, and then in the interior. The Asians go to Africa as indentured labourers to build railway tracks; they also work in the colonial administration. As such, they depend heavily on the imperial governments of Britain and Germany, quite exactly as the governments depend on them. So their nexus is reciprocal. But it is not always in favour of the African, the colonised. The Asians enjoy a special favour, though not so much at times, on the part of the imperial governments. This is what European historians have to say about these Indians: “It is not as imported coolie labour that I advocate the introduction of the Indian, but as a colonist and settler” (qtd. in Gregory 48). Vassanji has not given any hints of Indian colonialism in Africa, but the favour done to the Asians by the colonial governments is explicit in the novel. It is also

obvious that they would like to be under the imperial government of Britain than ‘the Black government’. Above all, the sense of superiority among the Asians over the Africans is also clear though not direct. The Asians find their self-interests in colonialism and settlement.

However, there is a streak of ambivalence and uncanny in the narrative. The Asian diaspora has no other way to ensure economic and political stability in an alien land. The narrator comments on the indifference of the Asians as, “Among the trading immigrant 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 savings” (52). But in the African point of view, the Asians are as foreign and alien as the Europeans. They have facilitated the process of colonialism and grabbed the economy of Africa.

Huseni, the half-caste, is not hailed by the community, nor by Vassanji himself. He is treated as the inferior African that can contaminate the race and ethnicity of the community. This is how the narrator dramatises his attitude toward Huseni the half-caste: “Tell me Shehrbanoo, would the world be different if that trend had continued, if there had been more Husenis, and if these chocolate Husenis with curly hair had grown up unhindered” (11). But that is not so . . . history is rather different, and the community has been in line. In the Asian point of view, the marriage between Asian and African mind is illegitimate. It will just make impure the Asian ‘Solar Race’. Vassanji’s portrayal of Huseni is quite stereotypical. He is called ‘Simba’, thereby related to the jungle. He will act senselessly showing his instinct and lack of reason. His friends are ‘Mshenzis’, the barbarians. He rejects civilisation and urbanity of coastal folk and identifies himself with the ‘savages’ of the interior. The

logic given for the method of the Maji Maji is in itself illogical and irrational. Huseni gets inclined to the movement, then gets a reproach by his father Dhanji Govindji, is hurt and runs away from home. He recognises Gulam as his brother, and is, thus, transformed as “the oldest son, the protector of Fatima’s children” (17). The African side of Huseni fails to give him any recognition in the community. He is assimilated with Asian traits. But, when he tries to regain his link with Africa – he goes to see his mother – he is rebuked and rejected. “...you are descended from the Solar Race! What do you have to consort with slaves for?” says Govindji to his son from Taratibu, the African slave woman (22).

Dhanji Govindji embezzles the community funds while searching for Huseni, his son. He doesn’t reject his son, but he rejects his Africanness, his inclination toward his mother. But it turns out to be tragic for Dhanji himself. “He would often murmur, ‘Forgive me’, as though absentmindedly” (32). The grief of his lost son, together with the sin, makes him schizophrenic and hallucinations of his sin make him ask forgiveness. When this embezzlement is made known, he is assassinated. The Zanzibari widow, through her daughter Fatima, brings this ill luck for the *mukhi*.

So there are no more Husenis, but the *mukhi* has to suffer quite a lot because of both Huseni and Fatima, the jungle and the Arab. What happens to Huseni, no one knows; he is believed to be hanged by the Germans for having taken the Maji Maji oath. This indefinite and unclear end of Huseni hints at Vassanji’s attitude toward him; Huseni just disappears in the mist.

The tradition of having a *mukhi* in a village is traced back to India. So, the *mukhi* Dhanji can be regarded as a link with India, or Indian traditions and culture, and Indian sensibility. He is also a unifying factor in this overseas community. But he

dwindles and swaggers when he comes into contact with the African and the Arab. In a way, the *mukhi* is the history; it takes a new turn when migration happens, both intellectual and physical migration. Conversion to Islam is in a way intellectual migration, for the bent of mind changed; and it resulted in social and cultural alienation.

The *mukhi*'s sin and his assassination haunt the community for many generations. The sin becomes the Original sin, and the *mukhi*'s crucifixion doesn't atone it, instead, it is Gulam who later becomes a missionary and gets killed in a road accident, is eventually described as a martyr. This crucifixion also doesn't atone the sin.

The World War One happens in European colonies also. The Germans warn the Asians beforehand and advise them to leave Matamu and go further interior. "If the British attack, the Africans can run to the bushes, but where will you run?" this is how the German admonish the Indians (Vassanji 48). So the community leaves behind Matamu where Dhanji Govindji settled decades ago, and continues the community's being on the move, and finding new places of security, safety and trade. They are not the Africans, the original inhabitants of the place, cannot run to the bushes as their relationship with the environment isn't natural and organic, and, so cannot be identified with the place. It's, therefore, inevitable for them to move to survive. And, they move to the deeper inland. The past contains the debris of civilisation,

The community in Matamu, fifty years old and more, vanished overnight. The traces they left behind were the boarded up stores, with some possessions in them, the empty mosque where Ragavji Devraj

and Dhanji Govindji had once presided, the cemetery where they buried their dead, the platform behind the mosque where they assembled for festivities.” (Vassanji 49)

These ‘birds of passage’ leave behind the branch where they had perched for so long a time. They leave behind these remains that tell plenty of their history. The historical event of the World War One vanishes the so long held home in very short time. Here the relationship between time and space is complex. The eventual factor of time doesn’t remain the same. It affects the community adversely. At this particular time, in a particular space, the community loses belonging and leaves behind just its remains which can become the fossils of history.

The Indian migrants find the climate harsh, and wild life and other insects threatening and troublesome. Ji Bai compares African weather and culture with that of India and finds India better. She laments the lack of communication and facilities in Africa, “I have lived through hell”, Ji Bai would say, “and this was hell. First the long walk in the hot sun, followed always by hungry hyenas who never left sight of us, looking out for snakes, fearing lions, afraid the guides and porters would murder and rob us” (Vassanji 50). So the community has to face a lot of difficulties. People gone in search of economic opportunity and peace are caught up in hard times and turmoil. Vassanji subverts the myth of Africa as known in India. This is the opinion of people in India about the Africa of aspirations: ‘If one of these boys got into trouble, ‘Go to Africa’, they told him. ‘Go to Jangbar. See what Amarsi Makan did for himself. And he was no better than you” (Vassanji 8). Africa is to Indians as America to Europeans – a land of dreams and aspirations, at least in myth and common lore. The people who go to Africa are believed to return invariably rich, with Amarsi Makan as the example. Exactly the same notions are in India and Pakistan when these Asians are

expelled from Uganda and troubled in other parts of East Africa. The people back at home will not accept them so easily, as, according to them, they have accumulated a lot of wealth in East Africa in all these years. Vassanji dismantles these notions and stereotypes while giving the minute picture of these migrants in Africa:

I cursed my husband for having decided on the journey, and I cursed my poor father for having sent me to Africa. In India we travelled by bullocks, we could talk to people in the villages, they were our own kind...and even the Europeans talked our language. But in this jungle the merest sound in the night would send our hearts aflutter

(Vassanji 50)

Ji Bai, the narrator curses her father for having sent her to Africa. Thus, history rectifies and corrects history, or at least it is obvious that history can be in different points of view, or at least reality is not fixed and absolute. The Africans regard the Asians as exploiters, colonisers and foreign settlers; the Indians consider them invariably rich and wealthy; and the immigrants' point of view is quite different. Vassanji shows how this 'America of Hindus' has been so harsh and rough for them; how that extensive geographical space of Africa is so diminished for them in their psyche.

Even during European imperialism, the administration in Africa changes; the German lose the territory to the British. This change of the government does affect the Afro-Asians' daily life. They have to leave behind Rukanga and move to a third place. Thus they leave their marks behind which tell a tale of agony and strife to survive. The German currency goes invalid, and they have to start anew. That way begins a new era, a new beginning. And, the adage "Begin at the beginning" loses its gravity

and falls apart. What beginning? The immigrant has to begin his life so many times.

The narrator says about their plight:

We had to start from scratch, borrowing and buying on credit, and we opened a small *duka* in the African section, selling kerosene by the jigger and packets of spice, and our fortunes never rose again, we were *mukhis* once, people called us Shariffu, Germans called us Bwana, but for forty years and more we stayed poor, changing trades, trying this and trying that, moving from here to there. (53)

The war thus gives a new turn to their life; their fortunes decline; their grandeur becomes a tale of the past; thus history shapes history and the beginning has no end, it continues escaping the historian. However, the past matters. The devastation done by the war is attributed to the *mukhi*'s sin: "From Dhanji Govindji Africa exacted a price, she says, nothing but his soul" (Vassanji54). Dhanji commits dishonesty and embezzles the community funds while searching for his half-African son, eventually he loses his soul and meets a tragic end.

This sin haunts the community. It appears to them as decline in their fortunes in the war. At least the myth goes like that. So, here within the community misfortune and poverty are associated with the ancestors' sins and wrong doings. This gives an imaginative logic to their bad condition, their plight and predicament. The notions of richness and fortune in India; and the plight of these Afro-Asians in Africa go immensely contrary. History does not let them achieve their dreams, for it cannot be the *mukhi*'s sin only, and, "... Ji Bai knew better. There was more to the past than just the sin" (Vassanji 55).

At least, at two places Vassanji conditionalises history; he imagines some different course of history; he creates an imagined innocence for his community. "...would the world be different if that trend had continued, if there had been more Husenis . . ." (Vassanji 11). At another place, he says, "Had Dhanji Govindji . . . stuck around longer in Voi or even Mombasa, he might have traced his grandson Juma and perhaps taken him home; and the world would have been different" (63). But both these things don't happen, and the world is as it is. So there is an absent imaginative counter history also. This conditional past enhances the subjective quality of the novel. It reveals the argument going on in Vassanji's unconscious. It also confirms that the past is traced in the present. Vassanji redefines the web of relations within the community. The web becomes more complex with certain historical events. There are two lines of descendants from Dhanji Govindji – one legitimate and the other is illegitimate. The illegitimate is half-African.

Women are prominent and important to carry on the line and to bring up the children. They are mostly widows, so strong and tolerant. It perhaps hints at or symbolises the hope and faith in continuity despite hardships and difficulties. It seems woman is the 'mother courage' who bears forth children and then brings them up. Thus, the production of a generation and its bringing up falls in the hands of woman.

When Dhanji first arrives in Africa, Africa acts as a woman, opening its womb for India and giving birth to Huseni. And, it is Africa itself (herself) that brings him up, and he identifies himself more with it. When he is willing to assimilate with the Indian ethos, his African identity is thrust upon him very forcefully and he leaves home to be swallowed up in the darkness of the jungle. But when the 'Tarzan of Africa' visits the civilization of India, he leaves behind his progeny which Moti and her sister have to nourish and bring up. So the relationship between mother and the

child is dominant and conspicuous in the novel. This finds parallel in the narrative structure also. Memory is the mother that gives birth to history. The real things taken out of the sack bring forth memory and lose their importance; they die for the moment. Then the history of those things through memory becomes prominent. So the things in themselves are not important, the memories, the past, the history they carry with them is important.

Though Juma is “the dark of the Indian,” the knowledge of his pedigree, his African roots hamper his assimilation with the Indians (Vassanji 62). Awal becomes the proverbial stepmother for him. He is looked down upon and ill-treated. Thus, he grows up ‘a second-class citizen, nothing more than a glorified servant’ (63). Juma receives this bad treatment because of his African origins. The Indians don’t accept the Africans as their own, or even equal to them.

At places there are judgements, comments and evaluations in the text. Vassanji comments on situations and conditions; these comments are deeply lyrical and subjective. At the end of Chapter 07, Vassanji comments on the migration of the Asians to Africa and describes it as wanderlust and running away.

The point to consider is if it is really *wanderlust and running away* (emphasis added), and if it is in the blood of the Afro-Asians, the temporal factor has nothing to do with it; the spatial factor also cannot affect it. But as the narrative shows, both time and space are crucial and determining factors in these displacements. And each generation has to suffer because of these displacements which Vassanji has termed ‘running away’. Dhanji loses his self-respect and sanity; Huseni the joys of family life and the security of community life; and Juma receives bad treatment at the hands of Awal and her children and he develops hatred for them. Vassanji attributes all this to

the ‘running away’, migration. Why do they run away? Dhanji runs away from the community conflicts in India; Huseni runs away from the ill-treatment of Fatima; Juma runs away from the ill-treatment of Awal. So there is a tale behind each running away. Finally, Vassanji himself runs away to that basement “to examine the collective memory – this spongy, disconnected, often incoherent accretion of stories over generations” (Vassanji 66). The narrative reconstructs the history of these displacements and their effects across generations of Afro-Asians. This running away becomes their identity and self-portrayal.

Taratibu is passive and self-effacing. She is not given any voice or any part in the action of the novel. She is never brought to the reader. Moti is married to Huseni. With the running away of Huseni, she has to remarry, and eventually her life becomes miserable. Kulsum is married to Juma. She is ill-treated and looked down upon. The narrator says about her, “Kulsum was the wife of the orphan, the half-caste, and herself of humble origin: there was no one lowlier than her . . .” (68). All the three women are anyhow associated with the African side. These women and men suffer prejudice and receive ill-treatment for they have come out of the womb of Africa. Even their mingling with the Indian side cannot save them. When Kulsum and her sister quarrel with Hassam Pirbhai’s family, they come down to abuses and obscenity. That refinement which they learn in Nairobi, the most European of East African cities, is put aside. The women display the rustic traits of their past lives. So, here also, they cannot escape their past. It seems that cultural hybridity does not make one less exotic and more near to the superior.

Kulsum’s theory of creation is based on the skin colour and gives an idea of the hierarchy of races settled in Africa. The golden Asians come in-between the Whites and the black Africans. They are the golden mean and “simply perfect” (73).

This gets verified also when one goes through *Portrait of a Minority: Asians in East Africa* where Yash P. Ghai writes about the Asian attitude toward the Africans. He says:

In a curious way, the Asians had come to believe in the myth of white superiority. The pyramidal racial structure was sometimes taken too much for granted; it was proper and inevitable that in the order of things, the white men should be at the apex. Rather as a corollary of this attitude, and, partly as a rationalization of the better economic, social and political status of the Asians compared with that of the Africans, the Asians began to believe that the Africans were inferior to themselves. If the African got less wages than the Asian, if he had to live with the whole family in one small room – ‘the boys’ quarters’, if he had to walk miles or lift heavy weights, the Asian conscience was untroubled because the African was different, he was inferior

(132-33)

The point is, though the Indians are a minority and live at the margins of the nation, they are not subaltern; they enjoy a privileged position. However, that is possible only with the British imperialism. The European presence in Africa is complementary for the privileged position of the Indians. Rosemary George also substantiates this point. She holds that the Indians in East Africa are not subaltern though they are on the margins, for they have always occupied a privileged position as compared to the Africans. Moreover, the links between trade and colonial exploitation are too close to be ignored by the indigenous population. The Indians maintain distance from the mainstream. They do not show any aptitude for acculturation and assimilation. This

point is clear in *Portrait of a Minority* also. Yash P. Ghai writes in ‘The Future Prospects’,

The Asians are extremely communal-minded, conscious of caste differences, intensely endogamous . . . the Asians wanted to be left alone to pursue their own traditional ways and thus to maintain their culture. Laws were enacted in East Africa providing for the application of personal, religious laws, e.g., marriage, divorce, succession, to the Asian religious communities. This helped not only to preserve the cultural identity of these communities, but also put obstacles in the way of inter-communal and inter-racial contacts. (132)

It all comes to making the Asians an ethnocentric community. But when this golden race is caught between the European imperialism and African nationalism, it gets displaced further and loses its position. The Asians in East Africa are inclined to the European colonialism. They are less amiable toward the African. So, actually, they are not the golden mean; they have their own interests. And, with the coming of independence and the going away of the British, things fall apart for the Asians; the centre refuses to include this margin as a part of the whole and decides instead to evict it.

Stereotypes and epithets also carry some historical truth and validity. The ‘Indian exploiter’ has come to establish in the context of European colonialism supported by the Indian. “How much in a name? Salim Juma, the name chose me, and it chose my future and this basement in which I hide myself with my gunny . . . ,” says the narrator in *The Gunny Sack* (108). Because Huseni is Salim’s grandfather, his name becomes a hybrid of Indian and African ethos and sensibility. Vassanji has

given him “more tangible Africanness” (Kanaganyakam 20). As Huseni, his grandfather, is half-African, Salim finds his identity and roots in Africa and is obsessed with Africanness. But at the same time, this sets him apart from the rest of the family. There seems to be a double in-betweenness in him; on the one hand he is between the European and the African, on the other hand, he is between the Indian and the African in his existence in East Africa. He says, “. . . I . . . became anybody. No trace of tribe, caste, colour, even continent of origin” (108). So in essence his name signifies everyman or no man.

Dhanji Govindji back in India has been both Hindu and Muslim. Here the Muslim aspect is thought to be exotic, and is hated which leads to communal conflicts. Subsequently, he has to quit Gujarat and settle in Africa. Now, in Africa, Huseni is both African and Indian. The Indians don't accept him. Salim is accepted by the Indians, but the Africans make him flee and he takes refuge in that basement with the legacy of the gunny sack. So, what is it that makes these people run away? Wanderlust? No. That is the effect of certain historical events, or an historical happening leads to a trail of events and effects.

There is a two feet long model steamer in a glass case and the children in the house take it as a sign of the past, a fossil of history. The narrator says about it:

But no one knew what ship it was, its real name . . . I was chided for not having thought to look for its name and the next afternoon after school Mehroon and Yasmin and I were sent off to the seashore on a mission to confirm my find. It was as though we were in some sense going back to the past...or if not actually going back then touching it in some way. (126)

The mere sight of a model steamer invokes history in them or excites the past from the deep dark recesses of their unconscious. They identify themselves with their historical running away from Gujarat decades ago. This will certainly take them further beyond to their origins in India, their sense of belonging and home across the vast seas in India. The myth of voyage becomes their history, or their history touches myth, thus turns ahistorical and atemporal. The ship cannot take them back, for it is just a two feet model. Time does not make a false move; they cannot have their past back. But the past is not lost. It is stored and preserved in their unconscious; it is in them, a part of them. The ship just reminds them of their past; it incites and prompts them to reconstruct their past in their memories and nostalgia. Their history finds place in narratives, and it becomes “a memory burdened by day-to-day worries” (Vassanji 127).

The African conjurer fails to call back Salim’s father, no one can do it by any means. But, “. . . listen, son of Juma, you listen to me and I shall give you your father Juma, and his father Huseni and his father . . .” (134). Thus narrative gives him his father, his roots and origins. As such, narrative not only becomes his history but also his identity, present and way to his identity. And, so narrative is more important than history. Salim’s ancestors, his roots, origin and identity and even his self gets enclosed in the narrative, he has just to listen, and we to read.

The political side of the telling is more terrible for the Asians. Though they did not take part in African politics so much, political scenario, its changes and political decisions affect them immensely, and even absolutely. About the neutrality of the Asians, the narrator says, “Among the trading immigrant 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 savings” (52). The security of their families, their trade and savings depends very much on the German and British governments. They benefit from the colonial governments, and their feelings are with them even though they are not equally treated as the Europeans, but they are regarded superior to the native African. As long as the British colonisers are in East Africa, the Asians have no apprehensions, no fears. But even before the independence, when nationalism starts growing in East Africa, and the Africans start gaining political power, it bothers the Asians. This is how the apprehensions are expressed:

“ . . . TANU’s strength was growing. And, after the election, which TANU won for the Africans, Asian started telling Asian, we must change, we must diversify. The *duka* is doomed. We must go into industry, into the professions, into farming; we must move other economic sectors. Wait and see, said others, the British have not left yet. (Vassanji 149)

Here the two historical phenomena: British colonialism in Africa and Indian settlement there go on the same side though with different motives. Perhaps so is the past. It is European colonialism that encourages and facilitates the Indian settlement in East Africa. History can take a turn and its effects can change.

The narrator stresses and emphasises his African origins and identity with a great vigour. He brings forth his African side again and again. It is, however, only because of Taratibu that he is African than Salim’s being called Kala or Huseni Salim Juma. There seems to be some urge, some necessity behind this so much stress on Africanness. Perhaps it is to contradict the political decisions and socio-cultural developments that took away the position of the Asians in Africa. Otherwise, as is

inferred in Ghai, the Asians are not so much African; they have a world of their own, a strata, not a substrata, in the hierarchy of the African society.

Nevertheless, Vassanji does not seem to celebrate his Africanness; he seems to assert it only to oppose some force; then it seems he regrets it also. He uses it only as a political argument against Africanisation. Otherwise, he is very much Indian, and different from the African. If Kala and Sona are two aspects of one self, Kala is not satisfied with his 'Black' ancestry. This is how he feels, "A whiff of African blood from the family tree would be like an Arctic blast, it would bring the mercury of social standing racing down to unacceptable levels" (150). Vassanji's statements about equality in East Africa are ironical. He writes them at a point in time when he has already faced inequality and injustice, in his point of view. "Mrs. Patel's line was also straightforward. African country. Races living in harmony. (Oh yes, Dr. Kara would echo when he was around, all equal, no differences) we are all Tanganyikans now" (Vassanji 147). At another place: "Independence was painless. A man's colour is no sin in Tanganyika, said Nyerere" (156). There is irony in the reassurance of the equality of races in Africa, and it goes contrary to later historical and political developments.

Independence is not painless. It turned out to be extremely painful for the Asians. They in a way lose their independence. And, races are never equal in Africa, not in colonial administration, and also not when the Africans come to power. These ironical statements enhance the narrator's subjective attitude, his pain at independence or loss of the British administration, and the injustice and inequality he has to suffer after independence. This is what the narrator says about the great historical event of independence, "Prince Philip came to give the country away, but in Kichwele we stayed home and followed the events in the newspapers and on the radio . . . we saw

in our mind's eye lights off at the National Stadium . . . and again we all swore, far away at the National Stadium, carried this time by the wind" (156). The Asians remain indifferent to the independence and describe it as 'giving away' of the country. Whose country? So, is it the country of the Europeans and the Indians? They do not celebrate freedom. Perhaps it is independence for the Africans only. They just watch the change as they cannot stop it happen, history which turns out to be "history in making" for them, for the effects of this historical event are horrible for this "alien minority". They are demanded to integrate and assimilate into the African society and culture. The point to consider is whether they are really apart from the African. Ghai's account of the Afro-Asian society confirms the Asians' being apart and superior to the Africans, at least in their psyche and communal discourse. The African-at-power threatens their monopoly of trade; they do not like the African in power. These power relations integrated with social, political, economic and cultural factors determine the further course of history, for the power relations directly or indirectly affect all such factors, and thereby history. Leaving Indians comment in these words, "The world has changed too rapidly for us...we have decided to go to Lourenco Marques . . . we cannot watch our servants turning around and throwing insults at us" (165). Servant: the African, and insults: the assertion of power through his language.

The historical phenomena of the Zanzibar revolution, the ousting of the Asians from Uganda and the political and socio-cultural injustice done to the Asians in Tanganyika and Kenya are the core issues in the novel. Why these developments happen does not matter so much as how they happen and how much they affect people. The Asians and the Arabs lose their home in Zanzibar and have to flee to the main land to save their life. "A few days later they started arriving by boat, refugees from Zanzibar, with horror stories about the revolution . . ." (Vassanji176). They

started arriving later than loot and plunder in Tanganyika. Here Asians and other foreigners are attacked, their property and business looted and sacked.

Vassanji succeeds to bring all such historical events on one axis; they move round the same centre, atrocities done to the Asians in Africa; how they lose their home and nation in Africa. The Zanzibar revolution is no different than Idi Amin's decision, 'the final solution', or the Mau Mau in Kenya, or Africanisation, or Arusha Declaration. All history becomes a tale of suffering for these immigrants, and a tale of running away. Wherever they settle only to run away, they leave behind the debris of their civilisation. They carry these events in their unconscious, in their being; as such, it is part of their self and identity now. The personal history of the individuals very well embeds in this history. Salim grows along with these developments. This is a success of the narrative that the history of the community, various historical developments in the world and the history of the individuals are projected on the same plane; they do not collide with one other, nor do they transverse, nor intersect. The history of the community and that of the individuals seem to grow out of the developments in the larger society.

The Asians are forced to marry the Africans, but the point to consider is that the Asians are required to give their 'daughters' in marriage; why the female? It becomes a sort of cultural aggression upon the gender. And, the move gets linked to colonialism or hegemony in terms of internal colonialism and gender oppression. There are many forced marriages of Asian girls; the boys are forced to join the National Service. The hostility of African life gives Salim hallucinations and nightmares. ". . . strange black men chasing me through a thick, palpable darkness, carrying raised flaming torches and uttering strange oaths . . . I ran through thick bushes . . ." (202). The oppression of the African pierces down into his psyche also. In

the psyche of the Asians, Africa is 'strange' and 'savage'. At least they cannot make up with it. It haunts their imagination and terrifies them even in thought.

Salim curses his friends who advise him to take a trunk to the army camp; the trunk makes him suffer; he has to endure its weight while running and the African flogs him to run incessantly. The trunk makes him suffer more. Salim, the narrator's curse coincides with Ji Bai, the narrator's curse: Ji Bai curses her father for having sent her to Africa. So, both going to Africa, and going with a burden of legacy that has been troublesome for the Asians. The community maintains India culture, ethos and sensibility and does not shed its Indianness so completely. The Indians live an Indian life in Africa; they live in two worlds. They walk African terrain with the heavy Indian trunk. The narrator comments, "We Indians have barged into Africa with our black trunk and every time it comes in our way. Do we need it? I should have come with a small bag, a rucksack. Instead I came with *ladoos, jelebis, chevdo*. Toilet paper. A woollen suit. And I carried them on my head like a fool" (204). For these immigrants, their unconscious affiliation with Indian culture proves to be troublesome in Africa. With Indianness the Asians cannot assimilate in Africa, and the Africans punish them for being so Indian. Whatever, the trunk comes in their way and they stumble. According to Rosemary George, carrying of luggage is characteristic of immigrant literature; the immigrant does so to compensate for his essential homelessness.

Why do the Indians not go only with a rucksack? They do not choose to shed their past. They settle in Africa with all their past. It becomes a heavy burden for them and they receive many setbacks in Africa. Their past intrudes into their present and disfigures it, which eventually affects their life. In the dialogue between the past and the present, the past gets constructed in the light of the present. The narrator stresses

his obsession with Africanness. He even brings the social and the political on one plane. Taratibu becomes a metonymy for his Africanness. He invokes her very often.

To strengthen his desire to belong, the narrator says about Ji Bai, “Old, bony Ji Bai could match Amina word for word. Among her friends were more Africans than Asians... ‘Nyerere is my son’, she once told us . . . Amina asked, another time, to which she said, ‘yes I’m Swahili . . . and Indian and Arab . . . and European.’ . . . ‘Taratibu’, she once told Amina, ‘Taratibu carefully’ (Vassanji 227). But actually neither happens, nor Nyerere turns out to be her son, nor is Amina ready to be Taratibu, for they are both free Africans in independent Tanganyika. Amina does not accept Salim, and Nyerere cannot give the Asians equality they want. In Amina’s eyes Salim is always the Indian, compatriot and accomplice in colonialism and discrimination associated with it. Nyerere puts forth the Arusha Declaration which becomes fatal for the Indian *dukawallahs*.

It is very difficult to pinpoint Vassanji. JiBai is Swahili, Indian, Arab, and European. Does Vassanji wish a communal and racial harmony? But in Swahili point of view, the other three races have done injustice and discrimination to them. Vassanji gives an unfavourable image of the African. There are happenings of hostility between the Indians and the Europeans; at least they are not equal in socio-cultural dealings. So, Vassanji’s affiliations are ambivalent. He is with all races and against them all. He flows with them; he collides with them.

Sona writes from London: “Sure, we too have a history, and old traditions, but they are undefined, uncelebrated, and sometimes as confusing as a cauldron of witches’ brew, don’t you think? There lies the difference between our histories . . .” (236). Does Vassanji celebrate his history? Or does he show how his history is

confusing and different from that of the Europeans? He redefines and celebrates his past. He does show how it is a hybrid of many cultures, a series of many migrations and settlements. Their history and old traditions don't pin them down to some home and nation. Vassanji gathers together in patches the fragments of his community. He does it while showing the process of fragmentation; how the civilisation got broken to pieces and dispersed in various directions. Now he recollects the experiences, the past, to collect the pieces together, and to reconstruct the civilization, the past from under the debris left behind by the storm wrought by human hands. The narrator says, ". . . for a storm wrought by human hands does not wipe clean but leaves debris behind. Broken hopes, broken families, above all, broken faith washed away by the torrents into times flooding gutters, to be replaced by a new cynicism: every man for himself and God against all" (239). So the outcome of the past settles at breach; a breach that sets Vassanji's world apart, that creates a new world for him, a world built on the debris of his past. Here people have broken hopes, broken families and broken faith. Such is the world that Vassanji has constructed in the novel. It gets disintegrated gradually in the course of time. Certain historical events affect the community as to dismantle its settlement and coerce it to live in yet another world. As such, here, the past is shown more powerful and effectual than the present. In terms of effect, time is always linear, at least in the novel. The past shapes the present and lives in it to be reconstructed and recollected. But how much of it can be reconstructed and how much shed? As the past is not so concrete and integrated in the present, it remains dissolved and beneath. Its reconstruction may not be innocent and pure. The process of reconstruction itself may be affected by the present, 'a new cynicism: every man for himself, and God against all.' When this cynicism directs the reconstruction of the

past, that past cannot be objective and pure; it can be an interpretation of the past in a very subjective mode.

Arusha Declaration in Tanzania and Idi Amin's decree to expel the Asians from Uganda, along with the Zanzibar revolution, form the core of this desperation and disintegration. The properties of the Asians are nationalised; they are turned out from Zanzibar and Uganda. They lose everything in Africa: their belonging, their home, their nation – only the past remains with them in their unconscious with broken hopes and broken faith. They become complaining against man and God. They have nowhere to go and no one to accept them. No host society is ready to assimilate them; the African print media applauds the 'final solution' of Idi Amin.

So, here Vassanji turns over the pages of his own book, and shows us what is written there. He reveals his grievances against not only the African political decisions, but also the world society. He renders the predicament of a small community that is out rooted once, and then never held fast in any soil – that sapling is nowhere let to grow tall and healthy. Not even their own people back in India are ready to accommodate them; they perceive them as "rich and proud". Vassanji shows how conditions in Africa pull down their pride and richness. They are associated and identified with the old images, perceptions and stereotypes without being so. Their world goes void, and a sort of nihilism develops in them. These are the scars and unhealed wounds of Afro-Asians.

Vassanji writes, ". . . poetry being more real than reality" (265). By poetry Vassanji perhaps means the pattern in the past of these four generations that are shown in the novel. Dhanji Govindji searches his half-African son across East Africa and loses all his respect, wealth, sanity, the son and even life. Huseni runs away from

home when his step-mother taunts him, and he never comes back to his family and community. Now, Salim himself has to run away from the country to save his life; and he leaves behind his family which he knows is lost forever. Commenting on the predicament of his community, Vassanji writes, “The irony is not lost on me. But is it destiny that is ironical, or is it the ironical in us, a predisposition that makes us go after a certain fate, a certain pattern – poetry being more real than reality . . .” (265). Here Vassanji takes history to metaphysics and cosmic irony. He loses touch with the human world as if there is some transcendental history; or whatever he calls, the effects of history on a certain people at a certain time. He shifts to fate and bad luck in the fashion of Thomas Hardy. However, Vassanji does not declare it; he just asks whether it is so. So, he is in search of the cause and deviates from history to destiny.

In an interview with Chelva Kanaganayakam, M.G. Vassanji says about the autobiographical elements in the novel:

There are similar circumstances to those of my life. I was born in Kenya, in Nairobi, at just about the time when the narrator, Salim, in *The Gunny Sack* was born there. There is an autobiographical element in that. My father was born in Kenya and died there and we moved to Tanzania after his death, but the story about the father’s family in the book is completely fictitious. I did that to give Salim deeper roots in Africa. I felt like an African, and I gave my narrator a more tangible Africanness by making one of his ancestors an African. His father is born in Tanzania of a slave woman and then he is taken to Kenya. Salim’s childhood in Kenya and Tanzania, on the other hand, is similar, though not identical, to mine. The novel has its own logic that is omnipotent and that even the author’s life cannot violate. (20)

Vassanji delineates the verisimilitude of common people of Afro-Asian community in East Africa in the context of some prominent and conspicuous political and historical events. For instance, the migration from Gujarat, the Maji Maji rebellion, the World War One and Two, the Mau Mau rebellion, the Zanzibar revolution, the independence of many African nations, the mutiny in Tanzania, Idi Amin's turning out the Asians from Uganda, Africanisation, nationalisation of properties through the Arusha Declaration, and above all the German and British colonialism in East Africa are some historical phenomena in the light of which Vassanji has shown how the basic life of the Asians is going on in Africa. So, there cannot be many autobiographical elements in the novel; Vassanji gives his version of history as experienced by the community. He has subjectivised history; as such his feelings, passion, pain and agony enter the events which give them broader scope for understanding and interpretation. Thus, the events do not remain fixed and absolute, they get turned to almost metaphors and metonymies, or at least function at different levels in different angles. Vassanji has used very consciously some anecdotes and paradigms as metaphors, some small narratives to bring round some point, e.g. the death of the snake and that of the *mukhi*. He is extremely conscious of the narrative itself, for he uses the words 'theme' and 'metaphor' to mean narrative elements in the novel. So, he knows he is giving a narrative to the reader.

Vassanji places and fits some individuals in the major historical events of East Africa and sees what happens to them, and how they react to them. In the process, the history of nations, communities and individuals function on the same axis; history becomes a metaphor showing the predicament of an immigrant community, and some characters become symbols.

Ji Bai is as much the community itself and memory as a person who is a narrator. She is the collective unconscious of the community. As such, she is history, perception, feeling and a dynamic element and factor in the novel. At places, she becomes the ancestor, the origin of the community, or at least, the mouthpiece. She says, “I am Swahili, Asian, Arab and European...,” a composite culture of all races. She is one of the voices in the novel, an authentic source of the narrative.

Kala and Sona, as Vassanji has himself stated, are his own points of view. Kala is obsessed with his Africanness and Sona with Indianness. Each undertakes his own exploration of a particular past. They also are contained in the national flag of Tanzania as black and gold. So they are Vassanji’s Indian and African origins and identity coloured with politics of nationalism. They also represent the composite culture of East Africa, and political and racial diversity in Africa.

Kala has been given more space and breadth. He is a narrator, one of the voices in the novel. If he is taken as the central character of the novel, then it is a *bildungsroman*, delineating his development, along with his roots and origins. He goes on to explore the question: ‘Where do you come from?’, and puts forth a narrative of his roots while “begin[s] at the beginning”, and ends in the west with no end to these beginnings, but just a longing for the end. Neither India nor Africa accepts and assimilates him; his Africanness and Sona’s Indianness both settle down in Vassanji’s unconscious and he becomes conscious of western culture and life. It is perhaps his encounter with a new culture that he remembers his roots and undertakes to explore his identity.

Vassanji says in an interview with Susheila Nasta, “Well, there is the Amina who does not work for him, and there is the Amina who is the possibility. The novel

ends with the rejection of the Amina that does not work, who in fact has rejected Salim. The new Amina could stand for hope and faith” (76). Amina also becomes abstract and symbolic. Kala does not achieve anything in love with her; instead, he is not assimilated in African culture and always remains “Indian”. Then Amina becomes hope and faith. As Vassanji has himself said that in a Third World country one has to be hopeful to be within the parameters of nationalism. So the symbol of Amina evolves from socio-cultural connotations to political ones. Vassanji says, “My characters don’t mean anything until they have a history” (Kanaganyakam 24). Rosemary George writes, “Taratibu in the novel represents the old Africa of slavery and exploitation. Amina is used by the narrative as an eroticised symbol of young Africa” (181). When characters become abstractions, history loses its plane and comes down on to the plane of allegory. It does not remain mere facts and dates, so the relationship between language and reality becomes more complex and multidimensional.

Vassanji narrates what of Africa is in him and what of India is in him. He makes his being inside out and reveals his African and Indian self. So what he calls the history of his community becomes the portrayal of his own self with Kala and Sona its two sides. Going to Africa to recreate his past is actually to go into the deep recesses of his own unconscious [the basement] in quest of his self; tracing things back with reference to certain points of time, in retrospection, is rather similar to “Spots of Time” which are critical in one’s development of self.

When questioned: it seemed significant that the three books that are a part of the inheritance in *The Gunny Sack* cannot be deciphered easily. And even when they are deciphered, their message is elusive. Is that a comment on your novel? Vassanji answered: “in some sense yes. The past in the book is deliberately murky to some

degree. I did not see, nor wanted to give the impression of a simple, linear, historical truth emerging. Not all of the mysteries of the past are resolved in the book. That is deliberate. It's the only way" (Kanaganyakam 22). Murky past and unresolved mysteries enhance the metaphorical quality of the text. One can see as much as one feels and speculates. So is the condition of the Afro-Asians. They are caught between many factors and elements. Things happen because they happen, the community is stunned between devil and deep sea; it does not sort out the causes and reasons of the plight, rather goes further to a new place. When Vassanji himself does not understand these mysteries, he points his finger at fate and destiny which is itself a mystery.

Vassanji is not writing history, he is not recording events and dates, though dates are reference points to events. He goes somewhere beyond facts, where there is haze and murk. He does not give the causes of history, instead, he gives the effects of history on certain people; how they feel in their ordinary life.

Though *The Gunny Sack* is a loosely held narrative of memories, discreet events of the author's making, with British colonialism in the background, Vassanji gives a lot of importance to many women characters to heighten the effect of the life the Indians have to live in harsh and tough conditions in East Africa. Men, the stronger sex, disappear to leave many women, the weaker sex, with many small children in an alien land where they do not have any supportive people. Also, women can be absolved from many blames which the Africans will lay on the Asians, like economic exploitation and spread of colonialism. Ji Bai is the origin, the source; Kulsum is the nourisher, the Mother; Amina is the end, or one that is sought.

The last part of the novel is highly lyrical. It contains the pain and pangs which the community has to suffer during these migrations and settlements. Vassanji

dismantles and shatters all perceptions of fortune, wealth and future in Africa. He also repeatedly complains against his community for not remembering the past. Their past is so gruesome that they do not think of preserving it. He writes, “The shirt to be burnt, the rest to be discarded or preserved individually. Thus the disposition of the past” (268).

Vassanji plays irony with his style also. Shams promises the people back in Gujarat of the coming of a saviour from the west. As the saviour fails to arrive, the community migrates to Africa. From there they have to run away to North America and Europe. Thus, Vassanji attributes the west with the saviour. But, will the west certainly turn out to be the saviour?

Vassanji himself urges that “the running must stop now.” They have now reached the west in pursuit of the dream, a large, beautiful and exciting world, but they are with wounded selves and dreams which happened in the course. But “let this be the last runaway returned, with one last quixotic dream. Yes, perhaps here lies redemption, a faith in the future . . .” (Vassanji 268). So the redemption lies in the west.

Between history and alternate history, there is space for transition. While recollecting the family history through wisps of memory, Kala, the narrator, considers alternate history related to Huseini, the chocolate colour half-caste. He wonders whether the world would be different with many more Huseinis. This consideration of an alternate history is a sign of Kala’s wish to change the status quo. Finally, he liberates himself from the burden of his luggage which Indians carry with them to compensate with their homelessness. He gives up the “baggage of paraphernalia” for it always comes in his way. And, giving up that ‘imaginary home’ is required to clear

way for assimilation in a modern nation. According to Salman Rushdie, as quoted by Rosemary George in *Politics of Home*, “Roots, I sometimes think, are a conservative myth, designed to keep us in our places.” And, upon that George opines: “If “roots” are a conservative myth, then all homesickness is fiction. Should we then look for ways to move beyond “home”, to resist and unlearn the seductive pleasures of belonging? And, is such a move possible” (199). Vassanji’s narrator, Kala, prefers to travel light; he does not carry along any baggage, any black trunks, any more.

Through a family history that covers many generations and is in line with many historical phenomena – in exact words, through history and alternate history Vassanji recreates and revisits his ‘home’ in East Africa while living in the Western metropolis. The novel presents in fragments the immigrant life of his community in Africa. Their experiences in Africa so described in the novel create an alternate history which forms a discourse which many Africans do not accept and many historical writings do not corroborate. Rosemary M. George describes this history of the Asians as their national culture. Regarding the national (communal) history of the Asians, Chanan Singh writes in his paper ‘The Historical Background’ edited in *Portrait of a Minority*:

In fact, the old link with India which was for centuries of such vital economic and political significance has little reality now. It might be thought that there was little from their long history in East Africa likely to be of use to Asians today. Still, Asians cannot unreasonably claim to have contributed something to development over hundreds of years; they can claim also to have shared the common disabilities of white racialism; they can claim to have helped to do something about them. To this extent their history can be used; and of course, whether useful

or not, it is still this history which continues to mould and to shape Asian attitudes and actions today. (10-11)

It is this history – national history that George claims to be their national culture – that shapes the Asians’ behaviour. And, Vassanji uses this history to reconstruct his past and discover his ‘home’ in Africa.

George further goes to say:

. . . Vassanji’s novel [*The Gunny Sack*] productively engages with several of the issues central both to the literature and to the theorising on the discourse of immigration. It does this, first, by the narrative use of repetitions and echoes to construct meaning from the time-space frames of the immigrant; second, by the thematics of multiple generations; and, third, by displaying immigration as a challenge to national projects. (178)

The multiple migrations, as a result of wanderlust and some force, with a *mukhi* at every place where these Asians go, form a national tradition and culture. As such, this narrative of many dislocations, the experiences in many places of East Africa, and the politics of home associated with it can be placed in the immigrant genre of postcolonialism.

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