

## Problematising the Diasporic Condition: A Reading of M.G. Vassanji's The Gunny Sack

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### **Abstract**

*Diasporic literature designates a critical practice that is highly eclectic and difficult to define. It not only records the geographical displacement, but also demonstrates the complexities associated with dislocation. The diasporic writing may be said to be a critique of the effects of migration, suppression, resistance, difference in articulation, etc. It acts as a continuous interaction among the sense of a historical transition, a cultural exploration and the forces that shape the conditions of an epoch. M. G. Vassanji's *The Gunny Sack* (1989) is a reflection of the diasporic condition exploring his creative dilemma as a novelist dealing with a history of continuous displacement. The present paper is an attempt to analyse the diasporic condition leading to the survival and suffering in the novel *The Gunny Sack* (1989) through a postcolonial perspective. Postcolonialism can be marked as the emergence of a new cultural identity drawn from history and diverse traditions of a particular country/community.*

### **Keywords**

*Diaspora, Cultural quest, Alienation, Memory, Identity Crisis*

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M.G. Vassanji (1950-), a Canadian author of South-Asian descent, is a prolific writer and one of the most prominent voices of postcolonial diasporic writing. Born in Kenya with roots in India, Vassanji was brought up in Tanzania. After getting an education in the US and final settlement in Canada, Vassanji owes a vast array of postcolonial and cultural moorings and experiences to draw from. And every creative writer translates his/her "balloon of experience" (to use a term by Henry James) in the form of creative art. The concepts of hybrid identity, unequal power relations, marginalization, resistance, memory and trauma, *etc.* have triggered Vassanji's imagination. All these perceptions loom at large in his writings and provide a rich opportunity for analysis of these paradigms from the perspective of the diaspora.

*The Gunny Sack* (1989), the maiden novel by M. G. Vassanji, opens with two pieces of poetry - first by W. B. Yeats and the second in some African language (along with translation in English) by the author himself. The extract from Yeats's poetry comments on the impact of the past on man's life and how it should be dealt with. This epigraphic piece seems to suggest that all of us have to grapple with our past since every one of us has some past. It becomes necessary for all of us that after acknowledging our past and learning from it, we should try to let it go. And the lines of poetry by Vassanji in an African language (and then translated in English), in one way or another, portray his personal experience, and appear to suggest the condition of a diasporic person always contesting for identity via the use of one's language learnt at the place of birth (African in Vassanji's case). Through these lines, one may infer that an individual is able to retain his/her relation and connectivity to his/her birth of place via retaining the native language. In other words, we can say that language may prove an effective tool for the quest for identity in the case of a diasporic individual.

*The Gunny Sack* relates a multi-generation saga of a family from a fictitious "esoteric sect" (Vassanji *TGS* 11) of Shamsi. Dhanji Govindji, a Shamsi, left Gujarat in the last century, sailed towards Zanzibar, "the isle of enchantment" (9). From there he migrated to Tanganyika (Tanzania now) and set up a shop in a village Matamu along the coast. Though India always remained alive in him, he adapted to his new adopted place. In the novel, the interaction between the natives (Africans) and the migrants (Asians) has been the focus. The novelist has used words of Swahili and Hindi also while tracing the history of the diasporic family. The story, put in historic perspective, ranges from colonial days to the post-colonial era and brings to the fore the agony, trauma and disillusionment of dislocated people. The paper analyses the novel to bring out in vivid terms the current and cross-currents of racial discrimination and hatred, cultural dichotomies, identity crisis, *etc.* as paradigms of diasporic condition.

Salim (Salum or Kala) Juma, the narrator and protagonist of the novel, is

the third-generation descendant of Dhanji's family in East Africa. Born and brought up in Africa, Salim has his roots in India, and finally he settled in Canada. Vassanji has adopted a clever strategy while naming the protagonist as "Salim" or "Salum" or "Kala" to show the hybrid identity of this character in terms of nationality, community and ethnicity. In one of his interviews, Vassanji shares his views:

... my initial reason was to choose a name which was deliberately ambiguous, one which could be Indian and African... And Salim lends itself to such a duality, as does Juma the surname. (qtd in Itty Sharma 4)

As the novel begins, Salim Juma, now living in Canada, opens the eponymous gunny sack, a "seductive companion" (Vassanji, *TGS* 7) inherited from his grandaunt Ji Bai. The sack – a repository of his past in the form of a beaded necklace, a photograph, a Swahili cap, three books, and other objects – prompts him to explore the history of his ancestors, the trauma of migration and exile. What one observes is that the geographical displacement of Salim and his ancestors is not only a physical migration, but also an existential plight. One comes to terms with the insight that the sufferings and alienation of the characters of the novel are not related to their isolated sufferings, rather these are the collective and intergenerational sufferings of the diaspora in general.

The paper attempts to analyse the novel through a postcolonial lens exploring the trauma of migration and exile, the psychic burdens of identity crisis, and the pangs of alienation as the diasporic condition. Firstly, the condition has been analysed by considering the historical context of the South Asians' presence in Africa. As we go through the perusal of the novel, we find Salim Juma tracing his origin to the Shamsi community. The Shamsis are uprooted from India because of drought and religious infighting. Salim's great-grandfather, a Shamsi, moves to Africa in search of better prospects. The narrator protagonist recalls the early migration of his ancestors:

From Porbander to Zanzibar was a sail of two tedious and monotonous ones, (*TGS* 9) ... A year after his arrival at Zanzibar, Dhanji Govindji landed at Bagamoyo. While the Europeans, the hunters and the porters, the seasoned Swahili traders, went inwards to seek greater fame or fortune, my forebear joined a small caravan going southwards on the slave route. (11)

The phrase "the slave route comes as a terse and telling remark for pointing out the pangs of alienation a displaced community goes through.

The gunny sack becomes instrumental in making the protagonist aware of the past of his family in particular, and the plight of the diaspora in general. The first story Salim finds about his ancestors is about the push factor of migration in search of green pastures. Then he comes to terms with the fact that in Africa his great-grandfather started his life with a slave woman Taratibu; and after the birth of

their son Huseini, the woman was thrown out of his life. Arun Prabha Mukherjee observes, "The 'using' and 'discarding' Taratibu becomes a trope for Indians' relationship to their adopted land" (175).

It is through the sack that Salim realizes how the Hindu names were dropped and their ethnic identity was compromised. It becomes obvious that the diasporic identity is not dependent upon the homeland for its survival. Vassanji clearly states in the course of the novel that in the coming generations of the Dhanji Govindji family, the last name 'Govindji' was "dropped by those to whom neither caste nor ancestral village name mattered any longer" (11). This kind of act may be termed as an act of cultural assimilation shown by the dislocated community.

It is quite interesting to note that the diasporic community of Salim Juma enjoys an ambiguous relationship with the Germans, the Britishers and the Africans. It may be observed that they identify themselves with the colonisers. They, as a trading community, were indispensable to the colonial establishments: first to the Germans, and afterwards to the British government. Their relative privileges, economic roles, and legal status distinguished them as "agent to an agent" (12). Furthermore, the diasporic Asian community perceived the Africans as "outsiders" (14). This stance on the part of the diaspora can also be taken as a strategy to survive in a new adopted home.

Salim Juma further illustrates the plight of the Asian diaspora when the Mau Mau Movement is dealt severely. Now the trauma intensifies during the post-independence era. The Asians find themselves at the receiving end: there is a pressure to change their cultural affiliations, and either assimilate or quit. These moves start a second-generation migration to the United States of America, Canada and the other countries of the West. The Asians/Indians are rendered the perpetual migrants, the victims of a history that denies them rootedness. And this uprootedness becomes more traumatic with repetitiveness. Thus, *The Gunny Sack* is marked by double displacement: first from India to Africa, and then from Africa to the West. The grandparents' migration from India, the parents' forced exile from East Africa, and Salim's resettlement in the West can be taken as a testimony to a pattern of displacement and "perpetual homelessness" (Vassanji, *A Place Within* 46) inherited across generations. This repetition mirrors what Avtar Brah describes as "the diasporic condition" where the migrant longs for "homing desire" (*Cartographies of Diaspora*) but it is impossible to return. Hence the graveness of the feeling of helplessness, nay that of alienation can be easily imagined. Vassanji translates this intergenerational pain of loss of sense of belongingness in words of Salim Juma: "Why do you call me "Indian"? I too am an African. I was born here. My father was born here – even my grandfather" (215).

This confession by the protagonist reveals that migration feels like a wound reopened across generations. And thus, makes it clear that the legacy of loss and dislocation is carried forward by the diasporic psyche. Vassanji makes us recognize and realize that trauma is never forgotten, but carried forward. The desire to return to one's home shows that Salim's ancestors live in "a continuing relationship with an actual or imagined homeland" (Safran 83).

This trauma finds expression in an identity crisis – a diasporic condition. At its core the novel explores the role of memory and history in shaping identity. Identity is not a stable narrative, but a collection of fragments, many of them painful, which the individual must carry. Salim's family history is a fragmented narrative, with different members of the family having different memories and different interpretations of the events. One of the most significant instances of memory and trauma is Salim's memory of the post-Independence Day in East Africa. This event traumatises Salim, and he spends much of the novel grappling with the memories and he reflects and recalls:

There were of course the demagogues out to provoke reaction against the Asians. 'The Asians are not integrating enough!' thundered one. 'If you want to stay in Africa, you must learn to live with Africans...the days of your dukas are numbered!' (185)

This excerpt, undoubtedly, highlights Salim's struggle to come to terms with the trauma he experienced and the importance of remembering the past, no matter how painful it may be. Additionally, the novel demonstrates how the past can impact any individual as well as one's identity, i.e., relationship with others. Stuart Hall's following terse comment on cultural identity holds true to the case of Salim:

It has its histories – and histories have these real material and symbolic effects. The past continues to speak to us. But it no longer addresses us, as a simple, factual 'past' since our relation to it, like the child's relation to the mother, is always "after the break". It is always constructed through memory, fantasy and myth. (395)

The history of Salim's family is a mixture of African, Indian and colonial narratives, and the novel highlights the tension between these different narratives when observed from a postcolonial perspective.

Salim's status as an outsider is emphasized by his appearance, as he is frequently mistaken for a European or Arab. He gets disturbed when he encounters the hyphenated identity of his grandfather Huseini as "half-caste ancestor" (124). Salim feels marginalised when on his admission to school he is asked to add his grandfather's name before his name. All other members of his family were having "the classier Dhanjee" name attached to their names. He questions his identity and he says:

I...became: anybody. No trace of tribe, caste, colour, or even continent of origin. How much in a name? Salim Juma, the name chose me, and it chose my future... (124)

He is ultimately unable to bridge the cultural hiatus. This dilemma in Salim's life creates a sense of rootlessness and alienation symbolising his quest for identity.

Analysing *The Gunny Sack*, the merging of cultures is observed. The characters in the novel are the product of the merging of the Indian and African cultures. This blending of cultures, *i.e.*, the hybridity is a mode of adaptation or adjustment. But time and again this culture of merging on the part of diaspora is challenged and they feel like losing their identity every time when the power structures change. Secondly, one may observe how economic measures rule the difference and division in social boundaries between the displaced and the natives. The cultural hybridity is obvious in the relationship of Amina and Salim, where we find that how Salim's past is repetitively questioned by Amina calling him an Indian; and he insists on being called an African. The postcolonial theory argues that diasporic subjects do not have fixed identities, their identities are defined by their positionality. And these reinforced distinctions may help one perceive the estrangement and alienation symbolic of the diasporic condition.

In the case of diaspora, one interesting thing is that the place, where one starts living, becomes the place to which the diasporic person starts relating to or belonging to. To feel this sense of belongingness, the individual strives to inculcate the culture of adjustment to this new site. Herein arises the question of exploring the problems of the displaced ones in order to see how a sense of displacement and a sense of adjustment are indirectly interlinked. It would not be wrong to suggest that a change in landscape may contribute to various changes in one's sensibility. As a result, it becomes important to find out how the intractable barriers may be removed. This quest of removing the barriers may also imply a quest for socio-cultural values that are necessary to stabilize the sensibility of the displaced individual. In fact, the entire situation surrounding an immigrant becomes quite complex because he/she finds himself/herself unable to build a bridge between his past and the present. The novel successfully explores the challenges faced by individuals who navigate between different cultures, traditions and beliefs.

The novel *The Gunny Sack* demonstrates clearly that a change of location does not mean loss of the place only, but also the loss of recognition and security. Alienation, therefore, becomes a structural aspect of the diasporic condition in the novel.

As we come to the end of the novel, Salim contemplates:

The running must stop now... The cycle of escape and rebirth, uprooting and regeneration must cease in me... Yes, perhaps here lies redemption, a faith in the future, if it means for now to embrace the banal present, to pick up the pieces of our wounded selves...because from our wounded selves flowers still grow. (308)

This final thought sums up that the titular gunny sack is a powerful metaphor suggesting the diasporic condition: an inheritance of memory which ensures survival accompanied by pain of suffering and alienation. The displacement leaves the diasporic subject hanging between two worlds: remembering and forgetting; belonging and not belonging.

*The Gunny Sack* offers a glimpse of those ordinary lives that are caught in the web of diasporic anxiety. Vassanji deals with a fundamental question that the lingering prejudices of colonial and neo-colonial agencies have to be subverted in order to understand the complexity of cultural hiatus which is emblematic of the changing world. He emphasises the importance of acknowledging and confronting the past in order to move forward and build a more just and equitable society. Without romanticising the plight, the novel celebrates the balance (between resistance and adaptation) maintained by the communities that survive through memory and storytelling.

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