

The Paradox of Return: Origins, Home and Identity in M.G.Vassanji's *The Gunny Sack*

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The idea of origin always overshadows the conceptualization of subjectivity in all possible forms. It is of great ontological significance to subjectivity, which gets culturally inscribed and represented as “identity” in terms of the differential categories of language, class, race, gender and sexuality in specific discursive sites. However, this idea becomes more intricate and uncertain in the case of M.G. Vassanji's *The Gunny Sack* and his other novels because the diasporic subjectivities that he and his characters illustrate are transfigured many times over in multiple sites through self-chosen migrancy or enforced wanderings as well as exile. Since diasporic identities get constantly ruptured together with their language, class, race and gender denominations, and get mutated as well as reconstituted in the translocal spaces, the originary notions of “home” which are imagined over and over again in different ways across borders and boundaries become ambiguous in Vassanji's case as well as in the case of other diasporic writers. Having been removed from a place of supposed origin and without emotional, political and cultural affiliations to territorially bound, static localities diasporic people move on, as indeed their homes do, like tortoises and their shells. Peter G Mandaville (2000) therefore comments that “identity and place” of diasporic communities “travel together,” and these communities practice “the complex politics of simultaneous here and there”. But the peculiar interplay of “here” and “there” characterizing the strange diasporic ubiquity that Mandaville talks about makes the theoretical categories like “nation” and “home” problematic and the narrative of home-coming questionable.¹

¹ While picaresque deals with wandering and escapades of the *picaro*, Bildungsroman charts the moral and psychological journey of the subject. Both novelistic modes are grounded in a strong faith in the stability of the subjective self, notion of authenticity and home to which the protagonist must eventually return. But the journey of the diasporic self is believed to be more a one way affair rather than one fraught with possibilities of return to home; it is more like the journey of Abraham than like that of Ulysses as E. Levinas would put it. In an ever-increasing metropolitanized scenario, with historical dynamics of displacements and dispersal, mutations and transformations of subjectivity, and complex cultural processes of negotiations between time-frames as well as between the desire of metropolitan cities of the First World and the Third World memories, any attempt to revive and hang on to an authentic cultural past, originary identity and

Maybe—one begins to wonder—diasporic people are at home everywhere, irrespective of borders, or maybe they have no home anywhere to be at, or rather they are in the “Third Space” as Homi Bhabha (211) would have it.

For Vassanji, home is multi-locational in urban sites. Land-based ties and strong social bonds that would generally hold together people rooted in native, rural places do not apply to this Kenya-born-Tanzanian expatriate writer of Ismaili-Indian descent, domiciled in Canada. Owing to his over-hyphenated identity, the question of exilic condition in the urban landscape for him becomes entwined with the notion of home away from home in one sense and no home in particular in another sense. The First World metropolitan ethos of self-centered individuals, without much of a familial and collective, communitarian identity is what he is “comfortable” with, and he “assumes” to be part of it. Home in his case is therefore freighted with enormous investments of the imaginary. At least this is the impression he casts on us when we read his interviews.

In reply to the question by Sayantan Dasgupta in an interview, published in *The Statesman Review* on 30 May, 2000, about whether Vassanji felt as an exile or a global citizen in Canada after his migration there, he replied:

I am more comfortable defining myself in terms of my locale and city. That way Dar es Salaam would be probably the first place that figures as home. Every writer, I think, belongs to his city, to the streets and his urban landscape, *assuming* (my italics for emphasis) he is part of an urban ethos. Another place I could call home in that sense would be Toronto in Canada (ts.).

In another interview (first published in *India Currents Magazine* in March 1995), he talked about his own “dense social background” in Tanzania and insisted that his characters “must be seen in the context of their community.” Elsewhere, too, in a review of *Amriika*, Gene Carey (1999) quotes Vassanji as saying to him that he felt a sense of psychological belonging to East Africa and particularly Tanzania after crossing the oceans, and he needed “something to hold on.” Carey quotes him further: “Once I came to the United States I had a fear of losing my link with Tanzania. Then I feared going back because if I went back I feared losing the new world one had discovered.”

This is a curious state of affairs: Vassanji is caught between the homes “there” and “here.” On the basis of the idea of multi-locational home he conciliates between the nostalgic desire for home and community through his characters, on the one hand, and the inescapable consciousness of the reality of exile as well as absence of community on the other. But the conciliation never resolves these contradictory impulses roused by the idea of home. It is a contradiction that Vassanji valorized in an interview

selfhood becomes questionable, for no one can go back home, as Stuart Hall would say. It is in this sense that the diasporic self and his/her narrative interrogate home-coming narratives like picaresque and Bildungsroman.

with Pankaj K Singh in *Summerhill IAS Review* as a healthy and creative state, a kind of negative capability, in which he was able to say in Sanskrit “*neti, neti*,” meaning “not this, not this yet” (4). Desire for home in Vassanji’s case stretches to eternity as no new home ever found proves to be home enough to bring one fulfillment. Ergo the notion of multi-locationality of home is curiously nuanced and accentuated by a haunting sense of homelessness or exile.² Nevertheless in his treatment of home there are little or no pangs of separation and regrets, and the exploration of the themes of origin and identity in his works is always ironic and playfully ambiguous.

What emerges from the context of the ambiguity of home in Vassanji’s novels is a set of broader issues: how through personal experience the notions of “here” and “there” are conceived of and reconfigured in a new idiom; how the problematic of home is explored with tension between a homing desire on the one hand and critiquing discourses of fixed origins on the other; how momentous histories of nation-states are deconstructed through private experiences, memories and narrative strategies; how communities formed across and in between borders are understood as conduits for the diaspora to pass through and also cultural footholds to stand on; how notions of freedom, moral choices and ethical responsibilities under alien linguistic and cultural circumstances and also in new social relations are formulated afresh as well as exercised, and so on. Although these issues can be and usually are followed up in separate thematic fields in the studies of diasporic literatures, they all seem to revolve around the diasporic subject’s engagement with issues of origin and identity. These two ideas haunt the diasporic subject as a riddle, but how s/he explores the riddle and what treatment s/he makes of these two ideas differ from person to person. In fact while reading Vassanji we cannot overlook the relational positioning of this diasporic author vis-à-vis any other. It provides us with a line of inquiry to pursue in order to understand the specific historical circumstances and regimes of power under which Vassanji or any other individual writer or a group is made diasporic in the first place; the socio-economic, political and cultural conditions determining the trajectory of migration; the unique manner in which the diasporic individual or group gets situated within the social relation of class, gender, racism, sexuality and the other axes of differentiation in the new world, and the like (Brah 182).

We need to take up the relational positioning of diasporic writers to understand the specific historicity of their diasporic experience such as the

² A case in point is Vassanji’s *No New Land* (1991) where home turns out to be an unattainable phantasma and an eternal deferral of the fulfillment of a promise for Nurdin Lalani of Indian Shamsi community even after he emigrates to Toronto, a haven of safety and well-being from Dar es Salaam, which becomes dangerous in the post-independence period. This place thus turns out to be “no new home” and “no new land” because the same experience of disillusionment in the home left behind in Africa gets repeated in the new home in Canada.

material conditions of their journey into and situatedness within the cultural matrix of the host nation. This specificity is necessary because diasporan conceptual terrain has already become extremely beleaguered and unstable as writers theorize self-identity—as often as cultural theorists do—and claim epistemic legitimacy for their works under identitarian appellations such as “exile,” “immigrant,” “post-national,” “post-colonial,” “hybridized,” or “globalized” in terms of their individual diasporic experience. A plethora of such self-names with a strong flavor of “theory” also makes the reading of themes and characters in their works already theoretically over-determined. Therefore, instead of taking the self-name as a cue for our reading the works of a particular writer with a pre-determined approach, we should try to take into account the economic, cultural and political specificities of such writers, their works and the issues they deal with. For instance, writers in a wide range of tonal and semantic variations can articulate exile as a condition of existence, and the list of examples can be bewilderingly enormous. To take a very brief sample of such variations of starkly opposite kinds, in the poems of the Caribbean poet Derek Walcott such as “Far Cry from Africa” (1962) or the sections, namely “The Schooner Flight” and “Shabine Leaves the Republic” from his ambitious epic poem *Omeros* (1990), one hears a cry of anguish of the internally fractured creole self in a state of exile from itself as well as from the immediate culture. In contrast, however, one may as well recall how through a playful vocabulary, rhythm of jazz and folk music Edward Kamau Brathwaite, another Caribbean poet, who searches for his Caribbean identity, deals with the problems of colonial trauma and rootlessness. Similarly, in Hazelle Palmer’s anthology *...but where are you really from: Stories of Identity and Assimilation* (1997), the writers express a poignant sense of loss of origin and the pain of rootlessness in Canada. Palmer attends to the complexity of gendered and racial configurations of difference within the context of dominant, assimilationist Canadian social and political identities. To serve this objective she has compiled writings by non-white women in Canada, who discuss the issues of their racialized identity and that of their national belonging. A feeling of anger seems to permeate these writings. On the contrary, one hears Nuruddin Farah of Somalia, for instance, celebrating the state of exile and making creative use of it. Farah says:

One of the pleasures of living away from home is that you become the master of your own destiny, you avoid the constraints and limitations of your past and, if need be, create an alternative life for your self... You are a community when you are away from home—the communal mind, remembering. Memory is active when you are in exile, and it calls at the most awkward hour, like a baby waking its parents at the crack of dawn. (65)

Farah exiled himself from Somalia during the dictatorship of Siyad Barre and lived in many countries, India included. All the while he, as his above statement bears out, hung on to a clear and haunting notion of “home.” For her part, Bharati Mukherjee, another diasporic writer, would deny the

presence of the elements of “exile” in her own works, which she would much rather describe as “immigrant writing,” with an openness to new cultural experiences and an eagerness to adapt herself to the new forms and modes of life in the host country. For this reason, she is critical of the writings of those she calls the postcolonial and exile writers (par.74).

As for Vassanji, his family left for Dar es Salaam in Tanzania at the end of the Mau Mau period. After the United Republic of Tanzania came into being in 1964, its economy suffered a setback. Drop in the prices of sisal fiber and coffee led to slump in trade and worker layoffs. This increased resentment of the indigenous Africans against Indians and the whites. In fact the attitude of the indigenous people to the diasporic Indian trading communities in Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania had been hostile during the colonial period. In the hierarchical formation of “colonial sandwich,” a policy of social and economic organization during the colonial period, Indians constituted the middle-rung of the society as petty officials, managers in commercial establishments, teachers, artisans and professionals, with the Europeans on top and Africans at the bottom. They were considerably better off than native Africans, controlling as they did over four-fifths of the trade and commerce. Many of them, pejoratively known as “duka” owners because of their trading professions, were considered “parasitic” and hated for that reason. They had no role in anti-colonial struggle and the well-known Mau Mau movement in Kenya in the 1950s. After independence, they were treated as outsiders in most East African nations. In the name of state-sanctioned confiscation of property the shops of the Indian traders were also looted, and their houses as well as estates were seized. As a result, a great many of them fled to England, Europe and North America to avoid racial and political persecution at the hands of the right-wing forces and military dictators. Vassanji left for MIT in 1970 on a scholarship. After earning a doctorate in Physics from the University of Pennsylvania and working as writer-in-residence at the University of Iowa in the International Writing Program, he migrated to Canada and worked at the Chalk River Power Station for some time. Finally, he came to Toronto in 1980 and accepted Canadian citizenship in 1983. What Vassanji faced in Canada is generally the fate of all post-colonial migrants to the First World. Many of them are subjected in the new world to a set of racialized discourses of nation that designate them in stereotyped, stigmatized and essentialist terms as “Africans” or “Asians” or “Paki”—an odd assortment of entities that are alien, exotic and incongruous to the national culture, and even potentially threatening, particularly in the post 9/11 and 7/7 period of neurosis in the Anglo-American world. Living in their physical and cultural ghettos, these people are overwhelmed by a complicated network of differences played out in terms of heterogeneous ethnicity, race, culture and national histories. Thus rootlessness and the state of exile continue to be integral to the lives of people like Vassanji, who have coped with these problems often with an ironic detachment. It is the same detachment that we can perceive in the narrative structure and the characters in *The Gunny Sack*.

Racially, culturally and politically excluded from the host societies, these characters are people living on the fringes of the host society and dreaming of a home, replete with intimate memories and feelings of emotional affiliations. The narrator's remark in *The Gunny Sack* sums up the lives of the Indian traders:

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 immigrant's only concern is the security of their families, their trade and their savings. (52)

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

Rosemary Marangoly George treats *The Gunny Sack* as a work of immigrant genre for characteristics such as a disregard of national schemes, the use of a multigenerational cast of characters, a narrative tendency, full of repetitions and echoes and above all "a curiously detached reading of the experience of 'homelessness,' which is compensated for by an excessive use of the metaphor of luggage, both spiritual and material" (171). She seems to distinguish this genre from exile literature for its "detached and unsentimental reading of the experience of homelessness" (175) and its refusal to engage in the politics of either home or nation at least unlike Edward Said's *After the Last Sky: Palestinian Lives*, an exile writing, marked for its intense political engagement with home and nationhood. This distinction seems to be rather problematic and does not prove to be very helpful.³ If indifference to the politics of nation and rootlessness is the crux of the matter, what is important is how one—whether an immigrant or an exile—has to reckon with one's past, *return* to one's cultural roots and conceive of one's cultural identity despite the anchorage of real nationhood and home. However, Stuart Hall would remind us that cultural identity is not a fixed origin to which we can make some final and absolute return:

It has its histories—and histories have their real, material and symbolic effects. The past continues to speak to us. But it no longer addresses us, as a simple, factual

³ Rosemary George assumes that exile writings are necessarily political in intention and effect because of a gnawing sense of homelessness, although many a time exilic condition can be apolitical as well. One may recall, for instance, that in V.S. Naipaul's *Half a Life* (2001) the exilic lives lived by Willy Chandran in London and a province of Portuguese Africa are apolitical and that of his father at home is only ironically political. Similarly, the narcissistic regression of Santosh, another cultural exile in Naipaul's story "One Out of Many" in *In a Free State* (1971), into own his body is an exilic symptom, but apolitical in consequence. Further, not all immigrant writings are characterized by an unsentimental and detached view of home, for home can be many a time evocative of poignant nostalgia and loss.

“past,” since our relation to it, like the child’s relation to the mother, is always already “after the break.” It is always constructed through memory, fantasy and myth. (395)

So, it is no wonder that Vassanji too imagines self-identity *post partum*. He admits that he could not have been a writer in the first place had he not emigrated from Tanzania to MIT at Cambridge, Mass., as a student (Carey). Secondly, he would not have seriously thought over the identity question and that of origin had he not come to America and Canada. He said to Chelva Kanaganayakam in an interview, “Once I went to the U.S., suddenly the India connection became very important: the sense of origins, trying to understand the roots that we had in us” (21). Later, while teaching physics in Toronto, he “began to encounter his East African Past” (Linne). In Vassanji’s case, therefore, the consciousness of cultural identity and origin is possible only through displacement and rupture, the very conditions upon which memory operates. His engagement with the past and heritage in a detached, and also oblique way, through memory gives an ironic turn to his identity consciousness. Of *The Gunny Sack* he said to Kanaganayakam that he “did not see, nor wanted to give the impression of a simple, linear historical truth emerging” (22). For him the past is an aesthetic necessity, and it has great sacral, heuristic value. In this context we recall Pius Fernandes in Vassanji’s *The Book Of Secrets* telling himself: “Of course the past matters, that’s why we need to bury it sometimes. We have to forget to be able to start again” (298). In this novel, the diary of Alfred Corbin, a colonial administrator, comes into the hands of Pius, an ex-teacher of History, after seventy-five years. He tries to impose a narrative design on this riddlesome diary to unravel the mysterious relationship of Corbin and Mariamu and ascertain the patrilineage of Ali. And yet the mystery shrouding the matters of the past does not get completely removed.

In Vassanji’s novels in general and in *The Gunny Sack* in particular, the historical past concerning origins engages his characters in a tortuous way, mediated through memories of countless displacements and ruptures. It conceals truths more than it reveals them. The concealment caused by memory-slips as well as death and absence of persons, who could also have possibly narrated stories through alternative plotting, make the retrieval and reconstruction of the past impossible in any specific way. As a consequence, the narrator Kala Juma in *The Gunny Sack* celebrates the narratives that are rendered infinitesimally varied, provisional and open-ended, owing to fallibility of memory and the attendant epistemological uncertainty:

Wisps of memory. Cotton balls gliding from the gunny sack, each a window to the world...Asynchronous images projected on multiple cinema screens...Time here is not the continuous coordinate...but a collection of blots like Uncle Jim drew in the *Sunday Herald* for the children, except that Uncle Jim numbered the blots for you so you traced the picture of a dog or a horse when you followed them with a pencil... here you number your own blots and there is no end to them, and each lies in wait for you like a black hole from which you could never return. (GS 112).

Here the imagery of cotton balls, asynchronous images on multiple cinema screens and a collection of blots on a newspaper suggest a fluid and discontinuous memory and fragmentary time that call forth infinite narrative possibilities, each of which is discontinuous, indeterminate and relative to any other. But each of these is in itself paradoxically final, as it were, and a murderous “black hole” to suck one up into oblivion. Since a black hole is a condition in the outer space from which no matter and ray can escape, Vassanji, the physicist-turned-writer, uses this figurative as a dark, endless one-way passage from which the diasporic self cannot return, nor indeed can he progress towards any closure or resolution unless it is forced and deliberate. In his fictional scheme, migrancy turns out to be basically an interminable narrative journey without any beginning or end. One must wander endlessly and spin unending yarns of narrative and keep oneself epistemically alive. Hence *The Gunny Sack* begins with the narrator's address to the gunny sack, an icon of origin, an object embodying the past and a legacy from grand-mother Ji Bai, as “Shehrbanoo,” or “Sheru” for short, which should, troped as the Shehrazade of the *Arabian Nights*, spin out endless yarns. Further, just as the fear of impending death forces the Shehrazade into weaving endless tales from the loom in order to eternally postpone death in the *Arabian Nights*, the fearsome possibilities of marginalization and epistemic death in an overwhelmingly powerful host culture compels the diasporic self to churn out narratives for cultural survival. Sheru's endless tales of/for self-survival curiously parallel Vassanji's own story of a nondescript migrant writer in an alien land, struggling for identity and cultural survival. If travelling and writing become synonymous, in this peregrinatory process, the structure of authorial identity gets unsettled. In the words of Iain Chambers:

Writing depends upon the support of the “I,” the presumed prop of the authorial voice, for its authority. Yet in the provisional character of writing this structure oscillates, is put in doubt, disrupted and weakened. So we inhabit a discourse that carries within itself the critique of its own language and identity: for the travel of writing ...also involves a return. Here something is lost, and something is gained. What we lose is the security of the starting point, of the subject of departure; what we gain is an ethical relationship to the language in which we are subjects, and in which we subject each other. (10-11)

Even as one talks of “return” in the travel writing, in the sense Chambers uses it, it is more an oblique, fictional negotiation with imagined origins and a starting point in multiple sites of discursive subjectivities than an actual return of the native to a real place of origin, authenticity and tradition. Even if it is true that the migrant self cannot go back home, for the “home” is not any longer what s/he thought it was, it is still not untrue that s/he cannot at least make the discursive gesture towards home by way of writing about/to or of/for the place and people who are *imagined* to constitute home. “The security of the starting point, of the point of departure” is indeed lost, and all arrivals become enigmatic, but what is

gained are new linguistic subjectivities together with their new ethical imperatives of becoming interested in their roots, pre-diasporic identity/identities and so on, and above all a new type of discursive posturing such as writing home to a place of origin, while paradoxically critiquing the notion of the self-same origin. Absolute return is impossible, but tentative returns through gazing back upon an imagined past and a homeward discursive posturing are always worth the attempt.

As usual, most places in the Third World are always in the blind spot of the First World. For a diasporic writer, it is an epistemic death for her/him if her/his geographical and cultural backgrounds, whether African or Asian, remain unacknowledged and invisible in the cultural opticon of the First World metropolis. To overcome the crisis of invisibility a writer may adopt any identitarian posture or strategy that comes handy, and make her/himself not merely heard through writing but also resurrected/recovered, albeit in unexpectedly new avatars and denominations. That is precisely what Vassanji did, and in consequence his identity was mutated in interesting ways.⁴ This Tanzania-born writer of Indian origin, settled in Toronto, was first reworked as “African” at the time of receiving the Commonwealth Prize in 1989. Soon after his Canadian citizenship he became the “Canadian” best selling author of *The Book of Secrets* to receive the inaugural Giller Prize in 1994, and the blurb of the jacket of the Indian Harper Collins edition of *Amriika* says that he was chosen to be one of the twelve “Canadians” in *Maclean’s* Honor roll, bagging the Harbourfront Festival Prize in the same year, 1994. And yet all through these glorious moments of metamorphosis of identity caused by his diasporic re-locations, he still holds on to the Asian and African tag and talks about his interest in his “India connection” and roots in Kenya, Tanzania and India in a posture of “writing home” to Africa or India. This posture consists not merely in writing about India and Africa, but also getting published in these post-colonial locations of English.⁵

⁴ When Vassanji and his wife arrived in Toronto in 1980, they found many South Asian writers at work, but no journal to publish them. This was the reason why they founded the *Toronto South Asian Review* in 1989. While it was renamed the *Toronto Review of Contemporary Writing Abroad*, TSAR became an important publishing house over the years, publishing books on multiculturalism, diaspora, postcolonialism and the works of the Chinese, Sri Lankan, Indian and Indo-Caribbean writers. The writing of *The Gunny Sack* was in progress just about the time Vassanji was desperately looking for a forum for the publication of diasporic writings like his own. *The Gunny Sack* came out in the year 1989, coinciding with the emergence of *Toronto South Asian Review*, although the publisher of this novel was Heinemann International, London. Interestingly, it was published under the banner of African Writers Series and Vassanji won the Commonwealth Prize for this book as the first “African” writer. For Vassanji this African identity-tag was a necessity to be visible and heard in the first place, although he has been quoted as saying: “It was a kind of vindication to be published by the African Writers Series as an *Asian*... It was the only place I sent the manuscript; they were the only people who would know where Dar es Salaam was” (Linne).

⁵ English in the global multi-locations entails a transaction among subjects in terms of economic and cultural power. The post-colonial writer of the English language, already interpellated within it, is further subjected not merely to the process of trans-border

To come back to the question of origins in *The Gunny Sack*, they have no fixed coordinates of space and time; they have only some imaginary, fluid and contested locations to be constantly negotiated and constructed by memory. Vassanji calls the notion of origins into play in his novels only to emphasize their elusiveness. He does so by weaving memory and myth with history and by embedding imaginary locations in the real topography. In an essay titled “Community as a Fictional Character” he says:

My literary project... has been to trace the origins of a community, its development in a British colony, and finally its dispersal in the postcolonial era. In this way I look at the present century from the perspective of a simple community as it evolves and arrives at a metropolitan consciousness and loses a large part of its traditional identity. One could say that such a community is acted upon by history, and thus enters historical consciousness. In all of this, however, the individual within the community is of central concern. And in a final reversal, even as my novels make the community historical—paralleling what the modern world has done to it—by fictionalizing the community, they have mythologized it. (18)

In the fictional narrative of the community in *The Gunny Sack*, and also in *The Book of Secrets*, memory negotiates the colonial and post-colonial history of East Africa to underscore its contradictions and contingencies, foreclosing, as a consequence, the possibilities of any neat teleological and linear schema that might be thought of as underpinning such a history from a starting point or an origin. Throughout the narrative the history of the struggle of imperial powers of Europe like Germany and England over colonies in Africa, the World Wars, their impact on the demographic profile of Indian diaspora in the African east coast, and finally the decolonization of Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Zanzibar and other nations constitute the troublesome destiny of the people. They are forced to migrate and re-migrate to places both imaginary and real. The imaginary locations also undercut the fixity and factuality of real places, rendering the entire topography fluid and uncertain. Located in such a fluid topography, cross-currents of history and myth, the narrator negotiates communal and individual identities, the life of the continent of Africa and the lives of individuals. He explores the past, constructs genealogies and traces the complex formations of the sites of subjectivity through ruptures, dispersal and mutations.

The past is retrieved in the *Gunny Sack* and reconstructed only through the backward gaze upon the gunny sack that still carries the dust of Kariakoo, a street in Dar es Salaam where young Kala Juma, the

movements to locations within metropolitan centers, but also relocations back on the margins. In India, Viking, Penguin Books of India, published *The Gunny Sack* soon after it had appeared in Heinemann, London, under African Writers Series. Similarly, *The Book of Secrets* and *Amriika* were both published by McClelland and Stewart Inc., Toronto, in 1994 and 1999, respectively. While Penguin India published the former in 1995, Harper Collins Publishers, India, brought out the latter in 2000. His latest novel *The In-between World of Vikram Lall* too is no exception. Doubleday Canada published it in 2003, and it appeared in Viking by Penguin India in 2004.

narrator, fortuitously meets grandmother Ji Bai. It is she who conjures from the past people, times and places for him. He admits, "Thus past gets buried, but for my drab, my sagging ugly Shehrbanoo, from which the dust of Kariakoo has not been shaken yet" (*GS* 10). The dust—metaphorically, the remains of the dead—magically bodies forth the past and the entire line of forebears. Ji Bai speaks to him almost like a prophet, "Well, listen, son of Juma, you listen to me and I shall give you your father Juma and *his* father and his father Huseni and his father...." And thereupon begins Kala Juma's journey back into the realms of past. He confesses:

Ji Bai opened a small window into the dark past for me... And a whole world flew in, a world of my great-grandfather who left India and my great grand mother who was an African, the world of Matamu where India and Africa met and the mixture exploded in the person of my half-caste grand father Huseni who disappeared into the forest one day and never returned, the world of a changing Africa where Africa and Europe met and the result was even more explosive, not only in the lives of men but also in the life of the continent. (*GS* 135)

The knowledge of one's origins and past, howsoever shameful and sordid, is necessary, for "the future will demand a reckoning. We will not forgive those who forgot, the new generation of the Sabrinas and the Fairuzes will say" (*GS* 134-35). Therefore the search for the origins and past is also a moral responsibility towards the posterity and future to be assumed, in addition to the necessity for self-knowledge and survival on the part of the diasporic self. But the past so searched for emerges as an apparition in outlines shrouded by many a mystery. The line of forebears too is ridden with discontinuity and uncertainty. The time past, as quoted earlier, "is not a fixed coordinate" but a collection of blots of shadowy impressions, to be resuscitated into life by memory and to be strung together in never-ending skeins of narrative web. The skeins are fragile, provisional and indeterminate in themselves, but murderously final and sure like a black hole, from which there is no escape.

Kala Juma muses upon the great genealogical tree that starts from Dhanji Govindji, who came to Zanzibar as a trader from Junapur in Gujarat in the late nineteenth century and then settled in Matamu. His mention of the great grand father's arrival: "In astronomical terms it was Samvat 1942 when Dhanji Govindji first set foot in Matamu. 1885 A.D. and he asked for the shop of the mukhi" (*GS* 10), strikes one as a historic beginning, with great dramatic power and suggestion of enormous possibilities. In fact no sooner does Govindji arrive on the alien shores than he starts looking for a foothold in economic, social and cultural terms and an identity within the communitarian fold. Hence the need of a mukhi, the leader of Shamsi community to which he belongs. The mukhi helps him settle down there and raise a family, and so begins the multi-generational saga. The momentous arrival of this great forebear may well be a gigantic narrative beginning and the starting point of a glorious genealogy, but the narrator questions the enormity of such beginning and

the genealogical glory in the novel. Early on, we find him pondering over the name of the legendary progenitor thus:

But Govindji, the elders will now tell you, is not a family name—where is the attack, the last name that can pin you down to your caste and village, your trade? Absent, dropped by those to whom neither caste nor the ancestral village mattered any longer. Later this irksome Govindji too was dropped by one branch of the family and replaced with Hasham. Whence Hasham, an Arab clan name? (GS 10)

Eventually, Govindji takes Bibi Taratibu, a discarded African slave, for “comfort” in the cold African nights. From this union, which never merits any religious and social sanction, spreads out one branch of the family tree of “half-caste” children, starting off from grandfather Huseni. The other branch, not altogether questionable as the former but quite as doubtful, originates from the marriage of Govindji with Fatima, the squint-eyed daughter of a Zanzibari widow, with unknown antecedents. Even Ji Bai, herself eventually becomes an orphan, whom Gulam, the other son of Govindji, marries after having lost his first wife. Like Govindji, she too has her origins in Bajupur village in far off India of her childhood, beyond the seas. Further, the family name “Hasham” with unknown origins makes the genealogy still murkier.

With so many dubious origins, the elaborate family tree given at the beginning of *The Gunny Sack* as part of the textual structure serves to underscore the invalidity of any genealogical sanctity and purity it might claim for itself. First of all, the origins of the primogenitor Govindji, signifying the absence of the caste, village and professional antecedents, are rendered vague. If castes, places of birth, family names or professions are indicators of origins and a specific identity, Govindji has none of them. His only claim for self-identity is that he is a Shamsi, a half-Hindu and half-Muslim, a hyphenated entity in terms of religious practice and culture. Secondly, this fictitious mongrel community that he belongs to has dispersed all over the world, contaminated further by the beliefs and cultures of the new locations. Therefore it is also futile to expect it to be the repository of authenticity, purity and an unalloyed communitarian identity. In this context, the genealogical tree, usually provided in a biography or autobiography or history as an inherent formal feature, with all its documentary functions as regards the claims to factuality, objectivity and precision, is ironically deployed by Vassanji’s to question the notion of determinate origins, familial continuity and above all identitarian purity that it signifies.

The family lines and branches in the first section of the novel show many ruptures and missing links because of the fact that the home that Govindji sets up with the two women starts breaking all-too-soon. Owing to the pressure of the community, the slave woman Taratibu, upon whom Govindji has sired his son Huseni, cannot claim the status of the wife, and Huseni too has to bear the stigma of being half-caste and suffer racial contempt. In a bid to appropriate the son to himself and bring him into the fold of community Govindji prevents him from having any truck with his

mother. However, this patriarchal claim is rebuffed as Huseni runs away from home, leaving behind his wife and Juma, their son. After some time the wife too follows suit, violating the code of widowhood, much to the anguish of the father-in-law. She marries for the second time and goes away to a town in Kenya along with the son. To restore the severed branch of family line the old man scouts all over the eastern coast in search of his son and grandson, but to no avail. The search for the son costs him a fortune and his dear life when he allegedly misappropriates the community funds to defray the expenses incurred for the purpose. The family disintegration coincides with the ruptures within the community. As the highly eclectic Shamsi community begins to break up into Siha, Sunni, Vedantic and Sufi factions in India, it also falls apart in Matamu, Zanzibar and other places, with bloody consequences. While the runaway Huseni is lost forever, his son Juma, who is Kala's father, is retrieved in the narrative in the Second Section after a gap of two decades. This time gap is full of vicissitudes for Juma, through which he grows up to manhood. During this period his mother deserts him. While staying in the household of Hassam Pirbhai almost as an orphan, he is claimed by a Kikuyu woman, Mary, as her son. In due course he marries Kulsum and fathers three children, of whom the eldest, a daughter, runs away to London with an English teacher named Peter, marries him and gives birth to two babies named Peter Juma Harris and Sara Kulsum Harris. So goes "the next generation", in the narrator's words (*GS* 238).

Recounted in their bare form the above recurrent events of fleeing home, migrations, ruptures, losses and also miscegenation spanning three generations make up the family saga. All through, both family and community, which should have provided anchorage for subjectivities in filial and communal terms, crumble due to factors such as an absentee natural parent, self-imposing foster parent and trans-cultural as well as trans-national marriage. The ideological agencies of patriarchy that usually work in tandem with the community are also found to be defunct. As a result, family cannot hold together, and people become foot-loose without filial moorings. Many of them run away from the community never to come back. In such circumstances it becomes futile to trace anybody back to a point of origin along an uninterrupted family line. Thus the notion of origins and continuity that the genealogical tree suggests is ironically undermined. What is foregrounded here is the notion of discontinuity and indeterminacy.

Further, Kala Juma's legacy of miscegenation from his grand father assigns to him a hybridized identity, burdened with a troubled self-consciousness and an agonized collective memory of the search for selfhood that continues down the generations. Kala Juma reminisces about when Govindji, the great forebear, unloaded his donkey at Matamu and made it his home. "Africa opened its womb to India and produced a being that forever stalks in the forest in search of himself" (*GS* 39-40). The "being" in question is none other than grandfather Huseni, whose search for selfhood and identity in contravention of patriarchal authority of

Govindji and his communitarian claims is directed towards a pure, primal, originary womb that mother Africa, metaphorized as the slave woman, is vested with. What comes to the fore is the incapacity of patriarchy to retain its offspring within its cultural fold and under its ideological regime. That patriarchy has failed as the guarantor and protector of a secure family line becomes all too clear in that it admits to having been trounced by an overwhelmingly powerful womb that can allegedly claim back the creature it has produced. A disconsolate Govindji thus says to Jibai, "Africa has swallowed him up, Bai, taken him back into her womb..." (GS 32). Much later, Kala Juma narrates his sexual encounter with the Swahili girl, Amina, in a manner that distinctly echoes the union of Africa and India, although with great ironic reversal: "I heaved and embraced her waist, pressing deeper...and I got her...and her legs moved apart ever so slightly to receive me" (GS 222). The contentment of the conquest of aggressive, intrusive male sexuality over the supine, passive, sex-hungry female body, which the first person narrative style of the encounter signifies on a note of delight, is proved to be brief and illusory as objections of mother Kulsum to this affair between her son and the African girl thwart it. Edward, who now lives with the mother as some kind of a foster father to Kala Juma after his real father's death, too frowns upon the alliance. He says to Kala Juma, "Africans and Asians are different...it's like the story of —" (GS 223). The unsaid part of this reprimand speaks a whole volume of an unhappy family history of cross-alliance or misalliance that Dhanji Govindji had started. Desire of the narrator for autonomous selfhood and the urge to inscribe a contented self-narrative through juvenile rites of passage into self-knowledge, maturity, and later matrimony as well as settling down to a life ensconced within family and community become inconsequential in the face of the historical forces of race and class difference in the diasporan space. A constant sense of shame, discomfiture and incertitude about self-identity owing to being a half-caste prevents him from forging a relationship in terms of marriage with Zainab and affiliating himself with the remnants of an already fractured Shamsi community. For his dubious background he suffers violence and humiliation at the hands of Zainab's brother, and turns to Amina.

During Kala Juma's brief affair with Amina, who is also a radical student revolutionist, the barriers of race and class created by the colonial history of Africa between them prove to be insurmountable in the post-independence nation. The exclusionary discourse of "Africa for Africans" after independence calls into play the racial categories of discrimination and difference, in which Kala Juma stands on the fringes of the nation as "the other." When he protests, "Why do you call me an Indian? I was born here. My father was born here-even my grandfather!" she accusingly answers, "And then? Beyond that? What did they come to do, these ancestors of yours? ...Perhaps you conveniently forgot—they financed slave trade!" (GS 211). Kala Juma thereupon makes a counter allegation, "And what of your Swahili ancestors, Amina? If mine financed slave

trade, yours ran it” (ibid). At this moment the novel allegorizes the supreme irony of the diasporan state in Africa: while the past is imagined in a certain way for legitimating one’s cultural identity and to justify one’s claim to a place as one’s own “home,” it is challenged and re-imagined oppositionally by another person or group. In effect it becomes a contested ideological site of competing narratives of belongingness by migrant groups on the one hand and those that call themselves indigenous on the other hand, as both groups stand facing each other across the dividing lines of race and class in post-colonial Africa. The accusation and counter-accusation in which Kala Juma and Amina engage demonstrate how in a diasporan space of conflicting subjectivities past is deployed and counter-deployed for inscribing oneself in “home” while excluding the other. Here Kala Juma’s attempts—as part of Indian diaspora—at staking claims to a land as home and forging intimate personal relationship are challenged by Amina. Arrogating to herself the originary notions of indigenous self-hood she constructs a discourse of post-independence nationhood and home from which some people labeled as “outsiders” are to be excluded. What she clearly forgets is the mix-up of Arab and African races in her Swahili blood. Nevertheless she struggles with Kala Juma over the political and racial regulation of belongingness, and in this identitarian performative the latter goes on the defensive.

The above politics of identity has its distinct historical resonance, since economic and class divisions in Tanganyika and Zanzibar did not merely overlap ethnic divisions, given the long history of slave trade, but also ethnicity was politicized in Zanzibar in the 1950s, with the British administration giving recognition to many ethnic groups that were beginning to function as political parties. This period also saw the rise of nationalist consciousness that led to Tanzanian independence, but the sense of nationhood was so much fraught with racial differences both within Zanzibar and between this island and the Tanganyika mainland, coupled with desire for power, that a tussle went on between the two for decades until for the first time in 1995 a multi-party election was held for the whole of Tanzania to assume at least a semblance of political cohesion and multicultural coherence. This backdrop was further complicated by economic events like the decline of the profits in slave economy and the consequent abolition of slavery by the British on the one hand and the lessening of the commercial importance of Zanzibar port on the other hand, since both events had debilitating effects on the land-owning and merchant classes. So, Kala Juma and Amina, descendants of these two classes that collaborated in the slave economy of the pre-colonial days and became dis-empowered in the racialized colonial regime find themselves now pitted against each other in the racial rhetoric of mutual blame in the post-colonial dispensation. But this Swahili girl, on the strength of her African origins, rebuffs Kala Juma as the nation’s other.

However, after her return from England, a “sober,” “mature” but still a “Marxist-Leninist” Amina is brought round to the view that Indians settled in Tanzania are more African than Indian, and that there is a

“distinct Swahili-ness to their English” (GS 245). She is now inclined to believe that a process of acculturation merges the two races and creates a space for cohabitation. But then it is too little, already too late and quite ironical that she returns home already having got spliced with “a white American” man! The barriers of class and race that separated Amina from Kala Juma would not come in between herself and Mark, for the white man from the First World, who, like the American dollar, enjoys universal preference and currency in the global cultural economy for his racial superiority and imperial strength. Amina comes home to Tanzania “full of the world” in the trans-cultural, globalized accoutrements of indigenous dress and Afro hair style, mixed with western “hamburgers and chips” and radical anti-establishment political theory and praxis. She embodies a post-modern, triumphant globalism that cavils at the post-independence third-world modernity and government for its repressive tendencies, xenophobia, culture of intolerance towards minorities and lack of civil society, which is supposedly available only in the First world. But what ails her globalist politics is the fact that it is inappropriate to the domestic situation. The ethico-political standards of triumphant western nationalisms that matured in the nineteenth century and grew into colonial powers in the later period do not seem to be applicable to the fledgling state, Tanzania, that has just gained independence. To apply such standards—as Amina does for measuring the political and moral strength of a newly decolonized state—is quite anachronistic.⁶ In short, her politics becomes out of place, and she becomes a victim of the contradiction between her essentially liberal post-modernist politics and a nationalist vision of a misplaced socialist utopia that haunted many newly independent African and Asian states in the nineteen sixties. She is charged with conspiracy to overthrow the government. As for Kala Juma, he fears that he too may be implicated in the same crime because of his association with Amina. So he flees the country, leaving behind Zuleika, the newly wed wife and child Amina, named after the femme fatal, and finally arrives in Canada via Lisbon and Boston. Many others, namely uncle Goa, Zera auntie, Hassan uncle, Jamal Juma alias Sona, Kala Juma’s brother, too run away from Tanzania, which proves hostile to the Indian diaspora in the post-independent period.

What is at stake in the situation narrated above is how the multicultural situation of a post-independence Third World state is shown to be bedeviled by counter-racism, anti-white and anti-Asian feelings and therefore bereft of the virtues that a First World state in a similar situation

⁶ One recalls the passionate argument of R.Radhakrishnan (2001) that globality and globalization are at best an “ideological illusion” (à la Frederick Jameson) because there are dominant nation states in the First World that continue to exert hegemonic influence on contemporary geopolitical circumstances and arrogate to themselves the ethico-political authority to question the viability of the sovereignty of Third World and censure the mode of their governance, their inefficiency, poverty and corruption. Linked to this issue is the controversy in recent times whether it is ethical on the part of the dominant group to speak for the dominated and oppressed, let alone berate them on any account.

is usually—and unfortunately—believed to be credited with. In such a situation the diasporic Vassanji's fate or that of his fictional characters becomes really precarious, and they belong neither here nor there. As a result their identities become ambiguous and inauthentic both at the native home in Africa and in the adopted home in the First World.

As borders shift, the paths of journey change, destinies as also destinations alter through the strange twists and turns of history, new protocols of identity emerge in the changed political contexts. Zanzibar loses its commercial importance to the city of Dar es Salaam, the capital of Tnganyika under German rule; Mombassa, Zanzibar and some parts of Kenya, earlier colonized by the Portuguese, go into British control; the two World Wars that rock Europe and many places in Asia and Africa are fought as the contest among the European powers for imperial supremacy over Africa intensifies. As England and Germany fight over the East African coast, the Indian immigrants move from place to place to protect their lives, savings and trade. Under such circumstances Ji Bai leaves Matamu to Rukanga with her husband Gulam, and from there to Kariakoo in Dar es Salaam, and all the while the British and German colonial powers claim and counter-claim these wandering people as their subjects. While identities as colonial subject are thrust upon them by the European powers during the colonial phase, later in the post-colonial phase national identity is denied to them in the newly formed African states that spurn them as non-indigenous. Many of these “Britannia's children”—the narrator calls them so, underscoring their miscegenation—are therefore forced to migrate to the U.S. or Canada or England and acquire citizenship, but they all get reduced to the essentialist categories of class and race. Passport and visa, the key factors of citizenship, are grudgingly granted to these people through the embarrassing rigmarole of making them answer questions in the long queues at the consulate offices and immigration counters as to their purpose of entry, duration of stay, friends and acquaintances in the host country, social security, work permit, scholarship, if any. They finally manage to acquire citizenship, the denominator of national identity in the New World. But what next? Occupying the margins of the cultural space in the adopted home, many of them make a gesture of looking back to the home left behind, although interrogating the notion of origins at the same time. The homing desire that they carry within themselves across national borders gets fulfilled in inscribing multiple identities in imagined homes at multiple locations, but they never allow themselves to be bogged down by any of the homes, nor overwhelmed by nostalgia. At least this mindset characterizes the new generation of diaspora like Kala Juma and his brother, Sona.

Sona goes to Boston as a student and settles there. Although he never returns to Tanzania, he studies East African history all the same. The three padlocked books of Dhanji Govindji remain with him as a legacy of the past, calling forth his antiquarian engagement. Many questions that come to his mind regarding the life and times of the great progenitor remain unanswered. The letters, three of them that he writes to Kala Juma, are

also never answered. Kala Juma is disinterested to have a share of his brother's scholarly excitement over the speculations he makes about the past associated with the three books. As far as he is concerned, he refuses to be a captive of the past. The last chapter of the novel aptly titled "And the last flight" is in fact both about his flight from the African past and about the end of flights to be made in the future. In other words, this chapter gestures towards the end of all journeys of the protagonist narrator and the end of his writing as well. Accordingly, in this chapter Vassanji makes a somewhat metafictional statement through Kala Juma to bring the novel to an end. Kala Juma once again invokes the imagery of "blot" and "black hole" to only drive home the point that although the narrative possibilities of the past can be unending, the narrative game must come to an end at some point.

I can put it all back and shake it and churn it and sift it and start again, re-order memory, draw a new set of lines through those blots, except that each of them is like a black hole, a doorway to a universe... It can last for ever, this game, the past has no end, but no Sherabanoo, you will not snare me like that, let it end today, this your last night. (GS 266)

The ending of the story is neither a formal closure, nor the logical end of the chain of events, but the result of a conscious desire to terminate the otherwise endless narrative game. Vassanji's fictional craft primarily consists in fabricating multiple provisional narrative webs around an object that is retrieved from the past and vested with infinite magical power to generate stories. The inexhaustible narrative power inherent in the object derives from the secrets of the past, which can never be fully revealed, and its intimations cannot be entirely understood and appropriated. On the contrary, the seductive past of the object, be it a gunny sack or a book, can claim us, or ingest us, or suck us up into its black hole. For example, in the Prologue to *The Book of Secrets*, the diary of Alfred Corbin is presented as "the book of our secrets, *kitabu cha siri zetu*" and a "magic bottle," while its writer is described as a magician, who "steals our souls and locks them away... Because it has no end, this book, it ingests us and carries us with it, and so it grows" (BS 1-2). While the magic object has the narrative power to suck one, like the Genie with his bottle, into its charmed darkness and oblivion of the past, it can also, like the Shehrazade of the *Arabian Nights*, sustain itself up to an indefinite future, "spinning out yarns, telling tales that have no beginning or end" (GS 5). All one can do in these circumstances is to get rid of such an object, and the narrator chooses to do just that.

As discussed earlier, migrancy and writing are synonymous, particularly when the latter becomes a metaphor of one-way journey, prolonging itself eternally through constant negotiations with endless past. And yet the journey must end somewhere, and the writing must stop at some point. The narrator—in this context a weary traveler—also needs liberation from the prison house of the past and the labyrinth of narratives, notwithstanding the fact that the narrative game had earlier appeared to be a pleasant diversion for some time. The Shehrazade, who kept him "awake

night after night” and held him captive to her narrative, now must be made to sleep, forever. So, at the end of the novel the narrator describes the ghastly scene of the Shehrazade’s murder: “She lies on the floor, crumpled, her throat cut, guts spilled, blood on the floor... Thus the disposition of the past. To be remembered and acknowledged, if only partly understood, without the baggage of paraphernalia” (GS 268). In this brief description the Shehrazade mutates into the gunny sack and its contents, which are eventually disposed of and their spell exorcised for all times to come.

“Without the baggage of paraphernalia,” the past now begins to haunt Kala Juma as a shadow. It beckons him through the letters that both Aminas, the ex-lover and the daughter, write to him, with a longing for reunion. In her letter, the ex-lover also mentions that his daughter, whom she met some days ago, has meanwhile the looks of his mother. So, little Amina renews the presence of his mother Kulsum as soon as the latter is forgotten towards the end of the novel. But both Aminas are “to be only remembered and acknowledged” from a distance, never to be owned (GS 268). The mother, also a metonymy of the womb, should not be allowed to swallow him up like she did Husseni. The origins, like the “black hole,” should not claim him back and draw him into the webs of the narratives that recycle themselves. Therefore Kala Juma makes an impassioned and somewhat poetically charged address to the daughter—now a trope that is turned into the mother:

The running must stop now, Amina. The cycle of escape and rebirth, uprooting and regeneration must cease in me. Let this be the last runaway, *returned*, with one last quixotic dream. Yes, perhaps here lies redemption, a faith in future, even it means for now to embrace the banal present, to pick up the pieces of our wounded selves, our wounded dreams, and pretend they are still intact, without splints, because from our wounded selves flowers will grow. (GS 268-69)

The quixotic dream of the last runaway who has “returned” is a statement of the paradox of return from an endless one-way journey. Since “return,” as discussed earlier, is a fictional gesture of negotiating multiple identities and also desires of oneself refracted through the divides of place and time, Kala Juma talks of picking up the pieces of “wounded selves” and “wounded dreams” while pretending/dreaming that these fragments are amenable to fictional adjustment and a sense of harmonious selfhood that accommodates impressions and experiences of both past and present transacting with one another on a synchronic plane of consciousness. Furthermore, “return” also suggests the arrival at “home” in “the banal present” located on the fringes of the First World host society, a new site of negotiations and transactions of identities, but the journey must continue to churn forth narratives through the loom of memories.

Simon Lewis aptly says that the characters of Vassanji’s or those of the Zanzibari writer Abdulrazak Gurnah’s fiction are people doomed to live either as alienated natives in East Africa or marginalized aliens in the First World cities, and that they are peculiarly vested with “a non-identity

which renders their various flights ever away from but never towards (or even between) homes” (222). Nevertheless the one-way journey away from home that Lewis talks about does insinuate the meaning of the return of the runaway with “one last quixotic dream” —shall we say like the ambiguous homecoming of Don Quixote?—battered, but still dreaming and still full of faith in a creative and fulfilling future for the posterity: that “flowers will grow” maybe elsewhere, in another home at another location.

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