

In Search of Identity: Recreating History and Mythology in M. G. Vassanji's *The Gunny Sack*

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Abstract

M.G. Vassanji, a well-renowned South-Asian-Canadian Diaspora writer is specifically known for his obsession with history and mythology which he uses as a tool of writing. They perform the role of a researcher in his works to attain the true ethnic identity. Having belonged to the syncretistic Khoja Community neither Hindu nor Muslim evokes him the sense of de-centered identity, with this inner conflict of incomplete sense of identity makes him to prepare the plot of colonial and postcolonial history of nations with exploration of his community myth in his works. The novel, *The Gunny Sack* reveals this sense of Vassanji's Afro-Indian ancestry as it includes both nations' socio-political histories and myths. The plot of the novel is drawn from the repetition of history and myth of four generations in which each one is searching his true-self throughout the novel. In the novel, the writer has hugely elaborated the myth of his Ismaili-Muslim Community in fictionalized name 'Shamsis'. This Shamsi Community stands on the blend of Hindu-Muslim religion and has fantastic mythic origin of the Sufi arrival of India. He uses it with the national history of Africa and this interaction of history and mythology plays the part of cultural identification to the characters.

Keywords – Diaspora, Identity, Khoja, Shamsi, Sufi, History, Mythology

Introduction

Why this obsession with past? I can only conclude that it reflects the deep dissatisfaction of unfinished, incomplete migrations, a perpetual homelessness in my life. My colonial existence – in which memory and past were trampled upon in a rush to better our lot – and the insecurities of an unorthodox communal culture, in the process of extinction and reinvention by the exigencies of globalize living and modern politics, have both created an uncontrollable and perhaps vain desire to know and record who I am. There are the ways of mystic and scientist, to answer this question; and there is the way of history and fiction, which I find more compelling. In how I connect to the history I learn about myself (M.G. Vassanji: *A Place Within*).

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The Gunny Sack is the very first novel of Vassanji, published in 1989 and was awarded a Commonwealth Literature Regional First Novel prize in 1990 and has been published in German translation. The book deals with the hi(story) of four generations, beginning with Dhanji Govindji who left India for Zanzibar and Tanzania toward the close of nineteenth century and ends with his great grandson Salim in the basement room of a hotel in Canada, toward the close of twentieth century which shows the interweaving of past and present. The novel is embedded with mythology and history in a brilliant way by Vassanji as this subject is often explored by the third world writers in order to keep connection with lost homes. V.S.Naipaul, Rohinton Mistry and Neil Bissoondath are the writers of same voices.

Vassanji's fictional narrative *The Gunny Sack* and many of the others; *The Book of Secrets*, *Amriika* and *No New Land* are hugely negotiated in the background of history and myth to tell the life of his own Ismaili-Muslim Community in the fictionalised form Shamsis in colonial and postcolonial East Africa and later in the first world nations.

The Gunny Sack is the fantastic historical narrative of the imperial power game of Europe like Germany and England over colonies in Africa, the World Wars and their impact on the Indian Diaspora in East African coast and finally the decolonization of Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Zanzibar and other nations and its troublesome impacts on Indian Diaspora when they were compelled to take double migration struggling along the setting up the fissures of cultural identity. In the midst of such cross-currents of history and myth, the narrator Salim Juma negotiates communal and individual identities. He explores the past and constructs genealogical details of the origin upon ruptures, dispersals and dilemma of identities. It shows the intense desire of a writer to reconstruct history and myth in the way to represent the experience of a particular community under socio-political upheavals and shape a new kind of history of their own. In an essay entitled "Community as a Fictional Character" Vassanji argues:

My literary project has been to trace the origins of a community its development in a British Colony, and finally its dispersal in postcolonial era. In this way 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 (...) 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).

As the novel begins Salim Juma, the protagonist who now lives in exile in Canada opens up a 'gunny sack' bequeathed to him by his great aunt, Ji Bai. This 'gunny sack' contains three padlocked books which symbolize family history to him. From this 'gunny sack', he rediscovers the past of his

family and the history of Asian-Africans. Throughout the novel, history and myth is reconstructed through emerging of this 'gunny sack'. This becomes an origin and has endless stories of past. It performs the role of legacy of Salim's familial history from great aunt Ji Bai as 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 - grand father who left India and my great – grandmother who was African, the world of Matamu where India and Africa met and the mixture exploded in the person of my half - caste grandfather Huseni who disappeared into the forest one day and never returned, the world of a changing Africa where Europe and Africa also met and the result was even more explosive, not only in the lives of men but also in the life of the continent (154-55).

Ji Bai acknowledges him this hidden history of his ancestors in order to stable the present and future generation as absence of history provokes identity-crisis. Through this 'gunny sack' Salim discovers himself emerging from unifying two race–relationships of an Indian and African identity which started from his great grandfather Dhanji Govindji's relationship with African slave Bibi Taratibu, when Govindji migrated to Zanzibar as a trader of Junapur in Gujarat.

Salim Juma (Kala) digs the past to come in stable form and he finds out the several raising questions of his identity. Being an 'ex-centric' personality, he encounters various oppressed remarks over the history of his origin in the society. He admits his name has "no trace of tribe, cast, color, even continent of origin Salim Juma the name chose me and it chose my future". When he takes admission in his school his name is being asked that shows itself cultural hybridity rooted in Indian and African ancestry and he becomes "Salim Juma forever" (124) as name denotes; Salim in Cutchi and Salim/Salum in Swahili with his Indian nickname Kala which is too ambiguous. It is well known fact the whole identity of race, caste and religion is hidden in the name "how much in a name?" (124) and in this absence of certain name Salim is being suffered with the history of his origin either he belongs to India or Africa. Through an incident ; in the National Service Camp when he is posted to interior Africa in the Uhuru Camp (considered for its dense forests) only because of his name, where the Asians are not usually chosen as he claims "the Asian boys and girls were not selected for most out-of-the way places. But the names like Salim Juma Huseni"(225). To him history emerges in the form of discontinuity, uncertainty and "a collection of blots..." (129). For Salim, historical issues become more complicated because not only he is the part of Africa by geographical location but as well as he possess the blood and genes of African hood and Indian of half part gives him half and half historical sensibility from the both races.

All the four generations becomes the victim of identity-crisis in absence of particular historical sensibility. Dhanji Govindji himself stands under the suspicion of solid identity which is missed and discovered by Salim when he claims:

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? (11).

His name indicates no specific identity as it has no caste, village and other symbol except he belongs to the Shamsi Community a half identity; a half Hindu and half Muslim, a hyphenated identity he beholds that evokes suspicious functions in terms of religious practice and culture. Huseni highly encounters this identity-crisis because of being half-caste. As he is the first generation of Indian-African blood and is called half-caste by his own father. The unification of Govindji and African slave shaped up his uncertain present, future and multiple histories, mythologies and identities. As Hall rightly states, “cultural identities come from histories” (236). Then Huseni’s son, Juma is also suffered with the question of identity in the absence of certain historical sensibility and facial features when he is slapped by military policeman during the period of Mau-Mau war. Because of his looks and dark complexion defines him more African than Asian as after this incident when Juma’s daughter asks about the slap, Kulsum answers sheepishly; “he was only flipping the pages of his book. Did your father look like a Kikuyu?”(89).

In this genealogical history; history reversals go on generation to generation. The recreation of past is hold on through the search of selfhood and identity in which Salim’s escapade in Canada revisits the history, “[R]unning away. Wanderlust” a destiny he is following and “satisfied a wanderlust that runs in the blood” (75). His grandfather Huseni started this tradition of wanderlust. He runs away and left his wife and son in order to be the half-caste “always stalks in forest to search himself” (45). His Asian father (Govindji) called him ‘half-caste’ because he keeps relation with his African slave mother. Finally, he finds no space in both races and his identity becomes half and half so he escapes. Huseni’s disappearance approaches the wanderlust of Dhanji Govindji as he starts the search of Huseni. Juma too disappears from Hassam Pirbhai’s family for few years and repeats history.

Secondly, the repetition of history evokes through the preservation and rejection of African relationship of half-caste’s generation which is started from Govindji’s relationship with African slave. Huseni’s relationship with his African slave mother, Juma’s relationship with an older African woman Mary, who for him like a mother and finally Salim’s relation with African Marxist girl Amina. All the four generation betray African women and repeat history. Therefore Salim’s repetition of history through the life of Huseni and Dhanji Govindji, under the cultural hybridity proves him a

history obsessed man who traces the past in same manner as done by his ancestors as Carr points out, “past, present, and future are linked together in the endless chain of history” (179).

The politics of identity goes through the discourse of cause and effect of history where the historical causes of Asians' superiority over Africans are seen as the effect of ongoing generation through repetition. It can be justified through the love-affair of Salim and Amina. Both carry the burden of race and class created by colonial history of Africa within this relationship, the post-independent nation stuck between them. Through the discourse of ‘Africa for Africans’ challenges Asians in distinct racial grounds and the Asians who over joy the safer middle class and to be negotiated in relation to the White colonizers are kicked out of the country. The very first meeting of Salim and Amina brings up the hazardous form of identity. In which Salim 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,” here he brings back his cultural identity of an Indian-African diaspora. On this Amina replies curtly “And then? Beyond that what did they do these ancestors of yours? (...) Perhaps you conveniently forgot- they financed slave trade!”(242). Salim replies on this allegation; “and what of your Swahili ancestors, Amina? If mine financed slave trade, yours ran it”. The above conversation shows the diasporic state of Salim defences his space or identity in foreign land through his supremacy of past and too mentioning his cultural identity as an Indian immigrant whereas Amina justifies Africa her own home. It justifies through the conflictual subjectivities of past that draws a line of distinction by describing oneself in home while excluding the other from independent Africa. Therefore, Amina makes an ideology of post-independent African hood and labels Salim as 'an outsider'. History of the colonial nation constructs here the sense of identity for Salim which has been disapproved in independent Africa.

Like history, mythology is the source of cultural identity as Hall states that cultural identities are constructed through “memory, fantasy, narrative and myth” (237). Mythology refers to a set of traditional narratives of past related to the social and religious rituals that are to be believed and firmly followed by particular cultural group as Abrams explains it “a system of hereditary stories of ancient origin which were once believed to be true...”(178).

Vassanji has explored mythology in the sense of identical issue. The narrator Salim Juma is introduced with the fictional Shamsi community which has great mythological story. Salim also tries to justify his identity through myth. For the mythic beginning of the community, he recollects the location of an Indian village where his ancestors were initiated by “a tall bearded man...in a long white rock and a white skull cap...” (8). He was called Shamas and his followers were called Shamsis. Vassanji notes on this mythic story that eclectic Shamsis were persecuted by the purists from both the Hindu and Muslim group which gave many belonging to the sect. So the history of

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Govindji is fully based on mythology and in this context he neither inherits history of his origin nor any fixed familial identity structure. Secondly, the quest of the Mukhi Dhanji Govindji weaves the mythic story while his futile quest of Huseni makes him to spend not only his all life's savings but as well as the community fund that precedes his murder. Through the chapter 'The Suffering Mukhi', this myth emerges:

One morning a pir and his murid went walking the hills together ...they came upon a snake on a stone. It had been hit by a rock or a stick. It was writhing in agony, beating its head upon the stone first one side and then the other, and crawling all over it wounded broken head was a swarm of black ants... 'For the sin of stealing the wealth of the community entrusted to him,' replied the pir (62).

Here Vassanji speaks on the myth of sin and fortune healers.

Myth in superstitions way of behaviour follows Salim while his father died. Salim recollects the co-incident of spreading milk that is omen for their life as per his mother's belief. So spreading of milk proceeds to a long spiritualistic procession as an escape of mishappening. As Salim recalls, "... how could she forgive me, my crime was murder" (91). So Kulsum does intense prayers as per the myth of community.

In the relation of dream and myth; Vassanji draws this mode of mythology. It works here in the way of fulfilling the dream of logic of Kulsum which possess myth. She sees Juma in her dream asking for apples. Therefore myth solves the dream purpose and apples are to be served to Juma by performing rituals.

The tendency of myth using in the novel has frequently seen. Vassanji uses the mythological name of Hindus. When Kulsum narrates the tales of the *Mahabharata* and other epic stories to her children in order to preserve their specific historic- mythological sensibility. Dhanji's name mentions in the chapter 'As Strong as Bhima' also exemplifies myth.

Thus history is being emerged from mythology. The episodes that are preceded through myth and being treated by myth possess the history of ancestors and acknowledge the past to Salim. Kulsum's dream of Juma of craving apples and stealing apples follow the meeting of Ji Bai, while to seeing father's (Juma) soul to talk to him. Salim visits to Kassim Kurji, who is claimed to be a prophet and has power to bring the souls and communicate with them. At the time he is being observed as the son of Juma by Ji Bai from the way. Meanwhile this meeting discloses the truth of past and Salim's identity and brings up a perfect blend of history and myth as Salim admits:

The providence played its part. It was Juma himself who brought about the meeting- follow the train of events: the dream, the forbidden fruit, the sin, the lapse, the search for redemption, and history bloomed; knowledge was victorious (158).

Therefore, the novel evokes historical and mythological sensibility in order to need for the present and future. It also calls for the historical development in hybrid forms. The half-caste generation Huseni, Juma and Salim are the victims of hybrid identity. Vassanji has put great efforts to associate history with mythology in a very parallel form along with the national and familiar history. The whole novel shows the mirror of writer's powerful intensity and vain desire to use history and myth. Through the novel one can easily perceive the idea that how imagination and real events or accidents of history and myth can provide the heritage to a particular group of society. In true sense Vassanji works as "the folk historian and myth maker of his people, to tell his story/history" (Vassanji 63).

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