

THE THEME OF EXILE IN *THE GUNNY SACK*

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Abstract:

The present paper focuses on the theme of exile in “The Gunny Sack. In *The Gunny Sack*, Vassanji has depicted very vividly how the feeling of being a foreigner is the genesis of all uncertainty as far as the Indian Diaspora is concerned. Salim Juma, the narrator-protagonist, narrates how the Shamsi community, which settled down in Africa and helped the empirical forces in crushing the local Africans, was dislocated by economic factors. Dhanji Govindji, the narrator’s great grandfather settled in a village called Matamu and begot a large number of Progeny. Vassanji throws light on the various issues which the Indian Diaspora encountered in an alien land. The Indian migrants played the role of a buffer and did not show much sympathy for the nationalistic movements. The present paper is an attempt to probe *The Gunny Sack* and to offer yet another dimension of the process of identity formation. It reveals how the relations between immigrant Indians were conditioned and influenced by various social and historical circumstances.

Keywords: Migration, Identity, Exile, Diaspora, History.

Introduction:

Moyez G. Vassanji was born in Nairobi, Kenya in 1950 and raised in Tanzania. His family was part of a community of Indians who had emigrated to Africa. When he was 19, Vassanji left the University of Nairobi on a scholarship to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology where he studied nuclear physics in which he later earned a Ph.D. at the University of Pennsylvania. After his Ph.D., he emigrated to Canada where he worked at the Chalk River atomic power station. In

1980, Vassanji moved to Toronto and began writing his first novel *The Gunny Sack* which was published in 1989. That year, with his wife Nurjehan Aziz, he founded and edited the first issue of The Toronto South Asian Review (TSAR). After the publication of *The Gunny Sack*, Vassanji began writing full-time and ended his career in physics. Studying Sanskrit and Indian philology prompted Vassanji's career change.

Vassanji has numerous novels, including: *The Gunny Sack* (1989), *No New Land* (1991), *The Book of Secrets* (1994), *Amriika* (2000), *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall* (2003), *The Assassin's Song* (2007), *The Magic of Saida* (2012), and *Nostalgia* (2016). *The Toronto South Asian Review* has survived under a new name: The Toronto Review of Contemporary Writing Abroad, and has branched out into publishing. Vassanji won the *Commonwealth Writers Prize* in 1990 (best debut novel in the African region) for *The Gunny Sack*. He has also won the Giller Prize in 1994 and 2003, the Bressani Literary Prize, and the Harbourfront Festival Prize. He also has two short story collections: *Uhuru Street* (1992) and *When She Was Queen* (2005).

In *The Gunny Sack*, Vassanji has traced the ups and downs of immigrant Shamsi family which begins with Dhanji Govind himself and concludes with Salim Juma, Dhanji Govind's great grandson. The four generations of this diasporic family witness revolutionary transformations in and around the Eastern fringe of the great continent known as Africa. When crops fall in Junapur, Dhanji Govindi's sixth sense comes into play and he decides to make his way towards East Africa. He sets up his business in Matamu with the help of the Mukhi, Devraj Ragav ji. He begets Huseni through the alliance with Bibi Taratibu, a black woman. At this stage, rumours reach Gujarat that the migrant businessmen are begetting half caste children from local black women. This complaint sends Dhanji Govind ji away to return with Fatima as his wife as a step in line with keeping the blood pure. Gulam, another son is born out of this wedlock. The sons grow up as the years roll by.

Huseni gets married to Moti and Gulam to Ji Bai. Huseni, a hybrid misfit, hobnobs with blacks and

Dhanji Govindi's advice regarding Solar Race cuts no ice with him. On being rebuked, Huseni runs away from home, leaving behind his wife Moti, and Juma, their son. Dhanji Govind ji spends more and more time and money in searching his half- African son. One day he is found murdered for embezzling the community wealth in quest of his lost son.

The descendants of Dhanji Govind ji, the community of Indian Diaspora that survived for fifty years in Matamu, turn homeless overnight when British-German scuffle overtakes the region. The trading Indian community scatters in various directions and the Shamsi family reaches Dar es Salaam. While the runaway Huseni is lost forever, his son Juma is retrieved in the narrative after a gap of two decades. After being deserted by his mother, Juma grows up to adulthood in the house of Haasan Pirbhai where he is reduced to the status of a servant. In due course of time, Juma marries Kulsum, the narrator's mother. They form a happy household in Nairobi with the birth of three children- Begum, Salim (the narrator), and Jamal. The family witnesses mighty and earth-shaking events as the Mau Mau rebellions resort to brutal and wild killings. No one knows when they will strike, where they will strike, and whom they will strike. The days of British colonialism are numbered. The Mau Mau upsurge spreads terror and fear everywhere which adds to the travails and sorrows of diasporic settlers.

Main Thrust:

The Gunny Sack delves deep into major public issues like marginality, immigration, racism, alienation and homelessness which make the migrants to rethink their relations with their host country. Vassanji's prose is successful in capturing the pangs of dilemma which vex a diasporic identity in a foreign land. The questions of race, history, and identity crop up for those

migrants who live on the margins and lead a pathetic and dispossessed life in colonial and post-colonial Africa. The Diasporas carry a peculiar mindset, being loath to put their trust in anyone other than fellow Indians. This narrow-mindedness comes in the way of their establishing such links as may provide mutual assurance and closeness with the mainstream people. The Indian Shamsis can never place whole-hearted trust in the Blacks. the Indian Diaspora, especially the Shamsi community in Tanganyika always rally behind those who are in power; whether this position is occupied by the Germans or by the British. In a cynical vein, the narrator states how among “the trading immigrant people, loyalty to a land or a government always loudly professed, is a trait one can normally look for in vain.

Vassanji provides many insights into history, colonialism, post colonialism on East African Continent where Indian merchants lived, prospered and finally lost the claim to tranquil existence. The Indian Shamsi traders thrived on African East coast for centuries but ultimately are embittered when their estate or businesses were confiscated. The Indian immigrants in Africa were forced to flee the adopted land in the wake of threats to their cultural and racial identity. The go- between undergo a sudden fall in newly emergent Tanzania where political violence, racial tensions, economic injustices thwart their sense of belongingness to the adopted land. In post-colonial Africa they become the victim and are threatened with mass deportations. Vassanji tells Ray Deonandan in an interview that “Indians are fence- sitters... from this imperial history; we’ve become the middle- men everywhere we go. Sometimes, this is a reason for scorn, but provides a good vantage for observations” (June 12, 2008). The migrants do not have strong or deep roots in the soil so they run away whenever there is a crisis. The history of any migration in the world proves this point. Dhanji Govindi’s exile is voluntary. It is an effort to tide over an economic disaster that threatens Junapur in the form of famine. This migration to Africa is dictated by bitter and irreversible economic factors. Thus, migration can be an outcome,

says Paul White, “of tensions between the individual’s desires and opportunities- as a reflection of past circumstances and of expectations for the future” (15). The Shamsi migrants arrived in East Africa not only in quest of economic opportunities but also as a result of natural disasters and calamities in the Indian subcontinent. They shifted their allegiance with the change in the centre of power. In British Empire, they had the privilege of proximity to the government and were placed higher than the Africans in power hierarchy. They played a major role in subjugating the local Africans so that they could pursue their dreams. Vassanji provides a sympathetic and realistic portrayal of the sufferings of a Shamsi family when the British canopy folds up and the Indians are left high and dry.

The Gunny Sack is an epic novel delineating immense changes that overtake the Indian diasporic settlers in East Africa. Being a diasporic writer himself, Vassanji has lent this novel an aura of authenticity and genuineness. The Indians pass through various experiences, growing rich, enjoying life, feeling that the good days will never cease. Yet, change is the law of nature and political and post-colonial changes very often leave them unguarded and unprotected.

In *The Gunny Sack*, Vassanji has recorded many incidents which poignantly pinpoint the sordid spectacle of racism, prejudice, hostility and ruthless marginalization. Vassanji has soared high into the esteem of readers by lending a human touch to the tragic comedy of diasporic experience. It is firm and unshakeable philosophy of all migrant writes that they can have access only to, in the words of Rushdie, “an imaginary homeland” (10). Vassanji, like many other diasporic writers, feels that India or homeland is a distant vision and a remote memory. Salim, the narrator, has never visited India, the land of his origin, yet his connections are valid and can be lived only through imagination. Salim begins to realize that home is an imaginary place that he can never reach. His family is breaking up and the fear that haunts him is about the place where he should go. He feels that such place is nowhere to be found easily. He is confined to a basement in Canada from where

he is assessing his position: “But home was hardly a place I could return to. Home was something in my head. It was something I lost” (*TGS* 159). The sad fact is that he is a nowhere man, a homeless person dreaming of homes.

Migration affects the manner in which the members of the community see themselves and in trying to understand this, Rushdie views about migrant identity are useful when he asserts, “Our identity is at once plural and partial. Sometimes we feel that we straddle two cultures; at other times that we fall between two stools” (210). The Shamsi immigrants take great pains to preserve their cultural conventions and traditions. The younger generations seek assimilation in the mainstream for the sake of survival, but they face resentment as Africans regard them with misgivings and misapprehensions. The Diasporas undergo psychic trauma after settling in another country where they feel there is no place which they can actually call theirs. Displacement from motherland generates total sense of disillusionment when shifting colonial powers destabilize them in the adopted land. The descendents of Dhanji Govind ji bear the curse of homelessness in strongly compelling conditions. Salim provides a peep into the reasons behind leaving the home: “Have I followed a destiny? Satisfied a wanderlust that runs in the blood? ... I, like my forefathers before me, have run away. But what a price they paid. Dhanji Govind ji, his self- respect and his sanity. His son, the joy of family life, the security of community life” (*TGS* 80). Loss of home, exile, displacement and nostalgia are common experiences for the unfortunate immigrants who are trapped by the circumstances to bear this painful condition. Vassanji, says Chandni Patel, explores the ways in which “individual identities are changed by journeys- their own, their ancestors”, and those of their community” (59). He shows the effects of multiple migrations on the lives of Indian immigrants.

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