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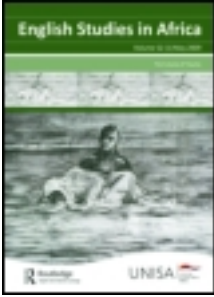
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VOYAGING ON THE MISTS OF MEMORY: M. G. VASSANJI AND THE ASIAN QUEST/ION IN EAST AFRICA

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**VOYAGING ON THE MISTS OF MEMORY:
M. G. VASSANJI AND THE ASIAN QUEST/ION IN EAST
AFRICA**

PETER SIMATEI

History comes to us not as raw, bleeding facts but in textual production, in narratives woven by desire (for truth) and a will (for power). What are transcribed and translated are traces, residues, shadows and echoes ... there is no obvious clarity to be narrated but rather a continual sorting through the debris of time. (Iain Chambers).

The Asian arrival in East Africa,¹ their struggle to hold together even as they tried to measure to the demands of their new home and in the face of decentering experiences; how this contact transformed them as they simultaneously reshaped the identities of their hosts, plus their subsequent dispersal from the region; all these constitute the historical drama whose contradictory depths Moyez Vassanji explores in his novels. His first two novels *The Gunny Sack* and *The Book of Secrets* journey back into 'the misty regions of the past' to confront those memories and secrets that weigh heavily on the present of the author. The nature of that present—actually, another gathering of the dispersed at other margins—is the topic of *No New Land*. I will address Vassanji's representation of the controversial presence of Asians in East Africa in the first two novels. But first a word on the structure of memory and history in these novels.

In both *The Book of Secrets*, and *The Gunny Sack* Vassanji is not only interested in re-telling the past but also in the way that past is remembered, or in the form it takes as memory. The past recounted in the latter novel spans four generations of East African Indians and comes to us through memory encapsulated in objects stored in a gunny sack bequeathed to Salim Juma by Ji

Bai, his grandmother. The gunny sack is both a technique and a metaphor. It determines the structure of the novel while at the same time constituting its substance.² The pattern of this novel mirrors the complex interrelationships of the events and characters remembered; disparate characters that compete for attention as the cluttered objects in Ji Bai's gunny sack trigger a flood of memories of equally fragmented experiences.

Vassanji has stated elsewhere that he conceived the past as '... just a bunch of memories, very discreet memories that interlinked and combined in all sorts of ways' (Interview with Nasta, 19). By using the gunny sack as a structural technique Vassanji achieves a number of things: he frees the act of remembrance and hence of narrative itself, from the strictures of teleology and closure, something which allows the stories to originate from multiple sites and times without losing their connectedness. The narrator does assert that he has to begin from the beginning which is in this case India, but the latter never really becomes a centre where everything begins even though migration started here. Such a centre is located in the gunny sack but which for that very reason ceases to be a centre because every object in the sack is capable of generating an autonomous story. These stories begin anywhere, as memory re-arranges itself, and travel forth and back between continents and times already traversed by the Indian people. Memory is captured in the metaphor of 'cotton balls gliding from the gunny sack, each a window to a world' and as 'asynchronous images projected on multiple cinema screens' (112).

This very 'asynchrony' is emplotted in the style of narration and reflects in a sense the very migratory life of the people represented. As is shown in the novel the Asian traders have no permanent abode. Even when they arrive in East Africa their 'settlement' here involves criss-crossing the three East African countries of Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania not only in search of trading opportunities, which is the main motive for their movement: they are also sometimes driven purely by wanderlust. It is no wonder, therefore, that when Independence is attained by the three countries and the freedom of crossing borders without checks becomes the first casualty of national consolidation, the community experiences a sense of loss and inhibition. As immigration requirements and their attendant strictures begin to redefine zones and movements into them, those who conceive of dwelling as a 'mobile habitat' (Chambers 4) feel a certain deprivation, hence:

See all those boundaries on the map? Soldiers on every one. Customs. Immigration. You need a passport simply to go to the toilet Only the Masai can travel freely these days. Soon they'll need a passport. And their cows will need a passport. (162)

Transience is a characteristic of the migrant conflicts with the process of post-colonial nation formation in East Africa which is territorialising and homogenising in nature. I shall return to this point.

The intermingling between Salim's memories and the objects that stand for these memories bestows *The Gunny Sack* with an interactive narrativity in which Salim's struggle to recall events constitutes the interrogation of the gunny sack for clarifications (110). Indeed, as metaphor, the gunny sack is a story teller in her own right. Conceived as female, Salim refers to her fondly as Shehrbanoo or Shehru for short, while her kinship with Sheherezade, the narrator of Arabian Nights, is made obvious in the text. The narrator casts her as his 'seductive companion, a Shehrazade postponing her eventual demise, spinning out yarns, telling tales that have no beginning or end, keeping me awake night after night, imprisoned in this basement to which I thought I had escaped'.³

The gunny sack is often inseparable from Ji Bai, her original owner. Shehru is not only a repository of the past; as a story teller her performance time is concomitant with the narrator's and involves constant challenges to the latter to face the past without evasion, however unpalatable that past may seem. Shehru inhabits that elusive space between memory and the moment of its projection—the moment of its assemblage—and acts all the time as the impulse behind the narrator's creativity. In the novel's overall structure, this space is often delineated by pauses and interludes between the end of a story and the beginning of another or moments of self-doubt in which the narrator is not sure whether or not to proceed with the recollection. The following is but a good instance of what I am referring to;

Running away. Wanderlust. Having come into this theme yet once again, memory plays a trick on me. From her corner Shehru throws a wink on me ... and do I imagine that the gaping mouth with its sisal moustache has a silent laugh on its thin old lips. (65)

If in *The Gunny Sack* Ji Bai's gunny sack bequeathed to Salim Juma provides the metaphor with which a haunting past is structured and unravelled, in *The Book of Secrets* it is the incompleteness of Alfred Corbin's colonial diary, its hints and secrets, that stirs Pius Fernandes' interest in the lives lived by East African Asians under colonialism. A retired school teacher, Fernandes is handed the diary by Feroz, his former student and now a shopkeeper, which he retrieves from the dark back room of the shop once owned by Pipa during the colonial days. Fernandes becomes fascinated not only by the entries made by Corbin, a colonial administrator, but also by the possible reasons that led to its preservation by Pipa. It is for these reasons that he seeks to 'recreate the world of that book'

and in doing so ‘construct a history, a living tapestry to join the past to the present...’ (8).

The project of the novel entails a reconstruction of another text, Corbin’s diary, which is itself composed of meditations on administrative memoranda from colonial office. This transformation by this novel of other texts into its referent makes it in the post-modern terminology of Linda Hutcheon, a ‘historiographic metafiction’. The language of metafiction, she writes, ‘refers at the first level to other texts: we know the past. . . through its textualised remains’ (119). *The Book of Secrets* is also metafictional to the extent that it is conscious of itself as a construction. By recreating Corbin’s diary, Fernandes in effect constructs the moment of colonial invasion as well as the recording of that moment so that we have a situation where, according to Shane Rhodes, ‘colonial habitation (is depicted) as a movement synonymous with the writing of history itself’ (179). Fernandes’ reliance on a colonial diary to write a history of the Shamsis will at first seem a contradictory exercise, but Vassanji (as is clear in his other novels) is not interested in constructing a discourse overtly oppositional to the colonial one. This certainly has something to do with the position occupied by the East African Asians in the racially layered colonial system where they were more a part of the colonising structure than a colonised people. Indeed, one reads in Vassanji’s texts a perception of colonialism as creating for the Asians in East Africa a more economically and socially enabling environment than does Independence. In both *The Gunny Sack* and *The Book of Secrets* Vassanji imagines a community whose fortunes, built under the protection of empire, begin to disintegrate with the collapse of that empire.

M. G Vassanji reads a certain nomadic propensity into elements of instability and transience that appear to haunt Asian presence in East Africa. This ‘running’, which the narrator identifies as a trait deeply rooted in his family, is broadly interpreted as an Asian dilemma related to the consequences of the community’s love for wandering. One such consequence is the creation of, and the self-transformation into, a people with unstable identities and origins; hybrids and migrants condemned to inhabit the borderlines of nations. Whereas the final exodus of Asians from East Africa is historically blamed on policies such as Africanisation, stretched to absurd limits by the Ugandan dictator Idi Amin, *The Gunny Sack* and *The Book of Secrets* hint to the contradiction between the process of nation-formation, with its territorialising and homogenising tendencies, and the migrant inclination towards borderlessness as another cause for such restlessness. The secure and exclusive world that the Asian migrants had carved for themselves on the margins of Arab spheres was redefined by European colonialism in a manner which maintained its autonomous existence along the East Coast trade centres. Although colonialism allots space racially,

hence denying entry into certain areas, it compensates for this prohibition by allowing both unlimited movements across its vast empire and the existence of autonomous cultural enclaves within its imperial boundaries. However, African Independence is perceived as posing a serious threat to this world for it seeks to submerge it in its quest for a uniform national entity based on an African identity.

Vassanji's recounting projects the African world as slowly emerging from the periphery. The 'interior', as those outsiders interacting with it (Arabs, Europeans and Indians) have named it, is often associated with backwardness and barbarism. In fact, in the popular diction of colonial and Arab stereotyping, which Vassanji shows to be also the language of the pioneer Indian community, and which his writing does not escape either, the African world is apprehended as the 'bush' while the term 'Washenzi', Swahili for 'barbarians', is used in reference to Africans.⁴ Not only does Vassanji contextualise Asian attitudes to Africans within the popular colonialist image of the African as savage, he also seems to rely, in his re-creation of the colonial and pre-colonial African world, on what Edward Said calls in a different context 'a huge library of *Africanism*'. Reading Joseph Conrad as a narrator of stories of empire building, Said argues that in his construction of Africa, Conrad, apart from his personal experience, relies heavily on the existing European lore and writings about Africa. He writes: '[W]hat he [Conrad] supplies in *Heart of Darkness* is the result of his impressions of those texts, interacting creatively, together with the requirements and conventions of narrative and his own special genius and history' (67). The result of such an enterprise in *Heart of Darkness*, surmises Said, is 'a politicised, ideologically saturated Africa which to some intents and purposes was the imperialised place, with those many interests and ideas furiously at work in it' (67). While not intending to reach similar conclusion, I will claim that similar strategy is operational in Vassanji's representation of pre-colonial and colonial Africa. This may be deemed a necessary strategy here, for after all is the writer not merely trying to reconstruct that primal moment of colonial insertion into the African terrain through the eyes of Mr. Corbin, an agent of Empire? The ideological implication of the strategy cannot, however, be missed since there is a textual tendency to uphold as dominant Mr. Corbin's perceptions and reconstruction of reality in which racial relations are comprehended in hierarchical terms.

The geographical organisation of settlements, too, are designed to reflect racial attitudes and hierarchies. Even as Arab supremacy gives way to European—first German, then British colonialism—and the centre of power moves from Zanzibar to Dar es Salaam, the hierarchy is preserved and is quite discernible in the way the settlements are designed, so that 'behind [the] beautiful, white European face of the town is our modest Indian district, every

community in its own separate area and behind that the African quarter *going right into the forest*' (*The Gunny Sack* 29; emphasis added). The Asian enclave in East Africa is, of course, part of the larger African world. If the latter does not, before and during colonialism, impact on the former, it is because the early 'visitors' and later colonialism itself constitute it as peripheral. But it is a periphery in the sense of an ominous hinterland where destructive evil lurks. It is the region inhabited by the 'Washenzis' (savages) and 'a Mshenzi was anyone who was not from within walking distance of the coast'(14). The apprehension with which the Asian migrants anticipate independence is rooted in this initial attitude towards the Africans. The initial and consequent failure to appreciate the latency of the African world explains the panicky reaction to Uhuru which the characters in Vassanji's fiction exhibit.

The in-betweenness of the Asian world gives it a mediating role in the whole project of colonialism, just as it did during slave trade, but it also infuses it with a temporary rootedness that later discourages any sort of integration in the new African nations. Whereas the tendency towards cultural exclusivity appeared sustainable within the colonial structures, and more so because it was in harmony with the colonial policy of the separate development of different communities—Bhabha argues that 'Colonial authority requires modes of discrimination (cultural, racial, administrative . . .) that disallow a stable unitary assumption of collectivity' (172)—African nationalism on the other hand sought to announce its presence through dismantling such a structure and in the process destroying the basic organisational logic of the Asian world. It may be noted here that the Asian community always had a predilection for isolationary existence and found the colonial practice concomitant with this. Ghai and Ghai comment that the 'notion of social exclusiveness within a framework of commercial and administrative relations came naturally to them. To refuse to integrate with neighbours of a different race or religion did not seem to them to indicate lack of patriotism or lack of a commitment to a political system' (11). The same notions and attitudes conflict with the post-Uhuru politics of nation building which seek to diminish all racial divisions. Although the narrator of *The Book of Secrets* is at this point critical of both the 'homogenising' politics of African nationalism and the exclusive tendencies in Asian culture, he sees the latter as greatly aiding anti-Asian demagoguery.

Asians become susceptible to 'hate politics' because they are unable to really identify with the political processes of nation formation. Their aloofness does not only contribute to their marginalisation, it also problematises their allegiance to the new nation. Yet this aloofness can be understood differently when looked at in the context of the Asian main preoccupation, as plotted out in both *The Gunny Sack* and *The Book of Secrets*. The Asians inhabit a space whose contours

are mapped by the nature of two important practices: Duka-based commerce and—at least for the Ismaili community (renamed Shamsi in Vassanji's novels)—a clientele religio-cultural mode. The latter is an institution built around the *mukhi* who is a religious leader and headman of a local Shamsi community. For the diasporic 'Shamsis', the mukhi provides the centre that enables a re-enactment of Asian identity and is therefore the symbolic link with mother India. He is also responsible for the integration, if not stabilisation, of the new arrivants within the immigrant Asian population through economic assistance and social integration (*The Gunny Sack* 10). In a sense then, there exists some kind of autonomous world among the Asian minority in East Africa that exacts from its members some allegiance. It defines itself in opposition to the African world which it designates as barbaric and from whose contaminating influence it must protect itself. It is this mistaken belief in their superiority that problematises their sojourn in East Africa. Yet it is exactly in trying to maintain the cultural purity of its existence that this world sows the seeds of its own destruction. In *The Gunny Sack* it is the story of Dhanji Govindji, the narrator's great grandfather, that writes this irony of how hybridity ruptures the realm of the pure. Govindji is in the group of the pioneer immigrants whose arrival in East Africa is motivated in part by myths already circulating in India about fortunes waiting to be made in Africa.

Africa offers not only the opportunity to make wealth; it allows for the enactment of cultural difference from India: 'In Africa they doffed their turbans and put on hats, these pioneers' (8). The cultural alterity that the realities of the new place enforces on the immigrant is re-played out back in India as the superior mark of the difference of the been-to, but in Africa itself the Indian origin is stressed in order to invoke the myth of racial superiority which in turn normalises the keeping of Africans as servants and as slaves. The practice of slavery is what finally contaminates the purity of the Indian race as is demonstrated in the case of Govindji's relationship with Bibi Taratibu. Taratibu is sold to Govindji 'at a cheap' price by the local mukhi as part of the assistance accorded him when he first settles in Bagamoyo after leaving Zanzibar. He turns her into a concubine with whom they bear half-caste son named Huseni. The proliferation of such a practice alarms India which still sees its cultural authority as extending to the diasporic populations. 'In Junapur and other towns in Cutch, Kathiawad and Gujarat a cry went up. Our sons are keeping golis, black slaves in Africa. And there are children, half-castes littering the coast from Mozambique to Karachi' (11). Protestations such as this by India may force the likes of Govindji to marry from Indian families but the attachments already made with Africa cannot be erased and attempts at de-linking precipitate crises of personality as seen throughout the three generations of the narrator's family.

Govindji's marriage to Fatima in response to the pressures from India forces him to abandon his African concubine whom he now relocates—quite significantly—'to a house at the further end of the village, bordering the forest'. Huseni is retained, but to the chagrin of the father he turns into an erratic iconoclast who transgresses not only the socially-constructed boundaries dividing the Indians from the 'mshenzis', but also all that which is prohibited in Govindji's household:

They called the half-caste Huseni 'Simba': lion. He was the kind of boy who unerringly senses all that is forbidden or feared in the home and proceeds to do them one by one; whose single-minded purpose in life is a relentless enmity towards his father, whose every move he tries to thwart, every rise in esteem he tries to bring down. (14)

Huseni's iconoclasm and transgression are represented by the author almost as traits with which half-castes are identified. Their violations of the norm is a rebellion against the attempts by the society to define their hybridity as an anomaly. In the popular imagination of the Indian community, these hybrids belong to the same category as the 'mshenzi', the Africans. They are said to spend most of their time loitering in brothels. But they are certainly a new breed of people whose presence throws into disarray the hitherto accepted racial basis of identity and they also become the haunting testimony to the historical injustice and sins of their forefathers. Huseni collapses, symbolically and literally, the artificial boundary between his mother's race and that of his father. His half-caste status signals the ultimate negation of cultural purism that India wishes to see maintained by her East African diaspora. It is significant that Govindji retains Huseni even as he rejects Huseni's mother. His refusal to accede to the demand of his legal wife, Fatima, that he disowns Huseni attests to his attachment to the young man and, by extension, to the African world to which Huseni also partly belongs.

Peter Nazareth has justly commented that the first part of *The Gunny Sack* is 'clogged and difficult' partly because of the remoteness of the events being recollected and partly because the narrator's ancestors were always on the move, making the narration of their history quite fragmented (130). Such a fragmented pattern is aided by the employment of the gunny sack as a structural metaphor. Vassanji has said this was a deliberate strategy: 'I did not see, nor wanted to give the impression of, a simple, linear, historical truth emerging' (Kanaganayakam 22). But if the story becomes clearer as the narration shifts to the present (just before and after Uhuru), then it is also partly because the narrative is now organised around the event of Independence as a dislocating force.

Independence, whether seen as a process that unifies or one that disorients, provides a focal point from which the Asian post-colonial dilemma can be told. The era of Uhuru institutes a national discourse that addresses Asians as an entity and assigns them a specific historical role as exploiters and economic opportunists. When it shifts to the post-colonial period, the narrative in *The Gunny Sack* exploits the falsehoods and cracks in the anti-Asian political rhetoric in order to turn the history of the Asians in East Africa into a narrative of racial persecution and discrimination. The narrative clarity then rests on the clear identification of the politics of nation formation as injurious to the interests of the Asian.

The uncertainties that accompany Uhuru lead to the first exodus of Asians from East Africa, but the first group that leaves is portrayed as 'Afrophobiacs'. They cannot come to terms with the idea of an African-ruled country and the realities which Uhuru brings to bear on the hitherto superior world of the Asians. One problem is that some Asians had never really imagined the possibility of the collapse of the British empire and had come to identify their security with its apparent immutability. On the other hand, the possibility of such a world giving way to an African dominated one was even more unthinkable. In *The Book of Secrets*, the characters, especially the elderly, accept the changes with shock and disbelief: 'To the shopkeeper, the British government, the Queen at its head, was absolute ruler. How could the mighty British give way to the African, the servant?' (264). The fall of the empire is greeted with incredulity and interpreted by characters as a betrayal by the British, but the worst comes with the demands of the new order, for membership of the new nation requires certain mental adjustments too painful for some Asians to bear. When Uncle Goa, a character in *The Gunny Sack*, decides to leave the country, he justifies this move thus: "'The world has changed so rapidly for us We have decided to go to Lourenço Marques We cannot watch our servants turning around and throwing insults at us'" (165).

Independence precipitates a crisis in the master-servant relationship because it is achieved on principles such as equality and freedom of the African hitherto treated as fit only to be a servant of both the European and the Asian. Independence is shocking to the Asian community because it suddenly overturns an apparently immutable order. Vassanji hints that hegemonic ambitions over the Africans inhibits a positive Asian attitude towards a post-colonial East Africa. The Asians were not wholly free from imperialist desires. As Dent Ocaya-Lakidi notes, 'The Asians were 'colonizing' immigrants to East Africa, even if under direct British supervision, in the sense that they came to be above and to dominate the indigenous people of East Africa in many sectors of life' (82). In a sense, the erosion of this privileged position by Independence is partly

responsible for the Asian exodus. But the Africans too misinterpret this new freedom to mean appropriation of Asian property and the cry 'the days of your dukas are numbered' capture this hostile and opportunistic attitude. Mutual suspicion now marks the relationship between the two races creating a situation that is then exploited by the political elite. When the anti-Asian agitators refer to the days of Asian dukas (shops) as being numbered they are targeting a popular symbol of Asian identity and security. The shop, with its counter forming a sort of barrier between the shopkeeper and the buyer, comes to symbolise the nature of the relationship of the Asian to the African socio-political ambience in East Africa. An Asian shop doubles up as both a retail store and as a home. The life of Pipa in *The Book of Secrets* offers a good example of how the shop can constitute a complete world in itself. However, the shop—and by extension the whole Asian commercial system which it represents—comes to provide a false sense of security and inhibits the Asian interaction with the African beyond the shop counter.

The 'painful' experience of having to decide which citizenship to take, British or that of the new nation, is yet another form of anxiety associated with independence, national identity and the pains of severance from the empire. In *The Book of Secrets*, it is mainly the young and educated generation of Asians who exhibit this trepidation, an ambivalent if not contradictory feeling in which the individual is torn between loyalty to the new nation as 'home' and a sense of devotion to Britain. The demise of the empire is apprehended as a loss of security and even identity. 'We were intensely aware of our essential homelessness. Our world was diminishing with the Empire', (274) reflects the narrator years after Tanzania's Uhuru. This world was diminishing in two respects: first, the actual territorial shrinkage of empire as the various territories grouped under it became independent with each going its own way; second, the effect of African nationalism on the small autonomous cultural enclaves which the empire had previously allowed to exist within it. In the novel, Asians who decide to quit often do so almost spontaneously; some, like Madhu Bhai the barber, simply wake up one day and decide they are headed for the old country. But others genuinely believe they belong in East Africa and are aware of their reformulated identities so that, despite their origins being elsewhere, East Africa has become part and parcel of their identities and a home more real than any of their imagined origins. This identity may remain at times ambiguous but in most cases it appears already regularised as witnessed by the psychic crisis that haunts any desire by characters to quit or even by their celebration of their localised identities. However, the emphasis of 'Africanness' in the new rhetoric of nation building causes an agony of self-definition in the non-African individuals as they try to demonstrate the authenticity of their belonging to the new nation

whose contours of identity are not yet visible beyond the skin-colour. Witness for instance the pain accompanying the reaction by characters in *The Gunny Sack* to the expulsion of the Asians in Uganda:

In Dar, at Amina's house, we said Tanzania is different, its Asians more truly African. Indians have been on the coast for centuries, and they speak English ... quite differently from Indian Indians. There is a distinct Swahili-ness to their English. And ask them ... the Indian term for bakuli, or machungwa, or ndizi and you'll catch them at a loss. (245)

The loss of original identity is positively asserted as signalling integration but it is also obvious that the new national identity being forged already bears the stamp of the very culture that is being abandoned. Again this is celebrated as the Indian contribution to East African culture (245). Immigrant Indians of the young generations attempt to seek accommodation in the new nation by appealing to its plural character, because they believe they have contributed to its formation. But as the relationship between Salim and Amina demonstrate, the hatred and suspicions of the past are deeply ingrained in their society and resurface as obstacles to racial harmony. On this issue, Rosemary Marangoly George has commented aptly that Salim, the narrator,

presents himself as fully constructed by the community to which he belongs.... [He] does not fully quite succeed in convincing the reader ... that his love for Amina is any different than the sexually exploitative relationship Dhanji had with Taratibu.... [He] is subject to the same myths as the rest of his community, so that when it comes to loving and living with an African women he cannot imagine doing so other than in ways that would violate the pattern of relationships that have his community's sanction (182).

However, the dialogue between the two enables them to confront the prejudices of race and allows Amina to speak retrospectively on behalf of Taratibu who as a slave was never allowed to utter a word. They confront with frankness the misdeeds of the past, and in accepting the present as the result of that past, seek new understanding of each other.

Let me note by way of conclusion that Vassanji does not attribute the Asian exodus from East Africa solely to the hostility of post-colonial politics or the Asian phobia for African self-governance. In both *The Gunny Sack* and *The Book of Secrets*, and in some stories in *Uhuru Street*, the new generation of Asians look to England and the United States as the places where their aspirations—be

they academic or just vague desires of the soul—would be fulfilled. This desire to move to centre from the periphery is in a way contiguous to the success of the ideology of empire as a subject-constituting apparatus. Its collapse coincides with the coming of age of this new generation not only academically but also as subjects of empire whose self-fulfilment equals identity with, and possibly migration to, Europe. Opportunities for travel provided by scholarship awards, as in the case of Sona in *The Gunny Sack*, reveal the suppressed desire for Britain. The fascination with Britain is related to myths woven around its imperial institutions and rituals and as centre for high life, which the colonial subject at the periphery of empire aspires for.

Hence writing to his brother from London, Sona records his first impressions as confirmations of ‘everything they said about it’: ‘It is glorious! It is magnificent, I don’t know how to describe it’ (235). London comes as a great contrast to Dar es Salaam—in fact it attains its stature through this comparison—not only in its size (‘a world of a city’ is the term Sona uses) but more so in its beauty and order. The ‘great structures’ that rise up in the city of London confront Sona as symbols of Britain’s imperial history, might and pride or, as he puts it, ‘the weight of history which these magnificent structures support’ (236). In the mind of Sona, this, plus the splendid parade of the architects of her civilisation (Newton, Shakespeare, Milton), more than anything else explains retrospectively why the English behaved the way they did—as proud masters—while in Africa. The experience is so awesome that he feels a sense of guilt when reflecting on the history of his own people, which pales in comparison to the achievements of British civilisation. Unlike the latter, the history and traditions of his people are ‘undefined, uncelebrated and sometimes as confusing as a cauldron of witches’ brew’ (236).

If Sona is hypnotised by the grandeur of the metropolis, it is the experience he goes through at the hands of immigration officials that reminds him that he cannot become fully accepted as an equal citizen of Britain despite his claims to being a British subject. He is merely on transit to America but he goes through nightmarish procedures in order to get permission to tour the city of London before he proceeds. Vassanji constantly contrasts Sona’s innocent celebration of his arrival here, his appreciation of England and even his flaunting of British subjecthood, with the outright rejection he encounters from the British immigration officials. In the story of Sona, Vassanji maps out the future dilemma of the immigrant whose move to the metropolis comes as a consequence of colonialism but whose arrival there is met with great resistance. The scene at the customs where stringent clearing procedures is humiliating to anyone wanting to visit London is only a window into the frustrating rituals of migration

which will later become the inevitable pattern of the former colonial peoples. It is this migrant life which Vassanji handles in his latest novel, *No New Land*.

NOTES

1. The term 'Asians' as used ordinarily in East Africa groups under one roof very diverse and distinct communities which have in reality different religions and languages and even originate from different mother countries. I use the names 'Asian' and 'Indian' interchangeably in this essay.
2. Charles Sarvan writes that the gunny bag is the 'suitcase of the 'insignificant' poor on the Asian sub-continent'. Vassanji's use signals his interest in giving history to those same insignificant people
3. *The Gunny Sack* 5-6. Commenting on this Amin Malak has written; '(A)nthropomorphizing the sack is no innocent or minor register; it represents an affirmation, an umbilical linkage to the narrative tradition of Islam, with which the narrator feels aesthetically and emotionally at home. Malak then adds in a footnote that 'Vassanji's characters, as with Rushdie's, Islam, while providing a source of self definition, is more an ethnocultural qualification than a theological weltanschauung'. Most critics, Malak included, have also stressed the generic resemblance of this text to Rushdie's *Midnight Children*. However, Vassanji should be taken seriously when he says that the name Salim despite its similarity to Rushdie's Saleem, is a common East African name.
4. Vassanji uses the Anglicised form 'mshenzis' which adds an 's' to the Kiswahili singular to form a plural. This is perhaps the way the Asians used it as a popular reference to the inhabitants of the interior.

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