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THE GUNNY SACK: ASSOCIATION BETWEEN BODY AND LANDSCAPE

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The Gunny Sack, a novel by Vassanji discusses the problematic union of the South Asian migrants who moved to East Africa in the early 1900s. The complete novel represents the harsh and typical life of the migrants in the new “home” land. This specific chapter is an illustration of an association of body and landscapes, a spirited saga of alliances, rivalries, success and failures, etc. This novel portrays a story of survival of Shamsi community amid dislocation, marginalization and oppression. Racial discrimination and difference is so rough and atrocious that it snatches away the entity and existence of an immigrant who enters a colonial country with the hope of better habitat and opportunities. The dualism is not in between the superior and the inferior, colonizer and colonized; rather it is hidden in human psyche as the difference between the self and other. The novel specifically talks about the sufferings of a family throughout the process of migration and finding a new home in Africa. Frank Birbalsingh makes a significant analysis about the techniques and story used in the novel:

The novel has some resemblance to Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight Children*, but a more resemblance to V.S Naipaul’s *A House for Mr Biswas*. The novel presents a comprehensive view of history and the issues in history like cultural deracination, multicultural co-existence, loss and exile. Yet Naipaul’s irony makes his novel an altogether different work- more penetrating and vigorous; but less tolerant and accepting. (1995 165)

Vassanji’s understanding of gender in the novel, *The Gunny Sack* is linked to dominant notion of femininity and masculinity, the oppressed situation of the female characters in the patriarchal society too. His portrayal of female characters can be characterized as Busia call ‘the peculiar construction of silence or silencing’. His authenticity of telling a tale in a tolerating and accepting manner that ranks him with V.S Naipaul and Salman Rushdie. His plotting represents the female characters a typical powerless women as of no active role in the society other than the physical roles which intensifies their voicelessness too. The novel deals with the silenced histories of the women during the Africa’s cohabitation with the Indian settler communities and the European colonialists. *The Gunny Sack* talks about the volatile union of Asians and East Africans (the new home). This union is significantly marked by the relation of Dhanji Govindji to Bibi Taratibu, and gives birth to a child named Huseni from a combination of an African and Indian resulting into a half-caste, half-African and half-Indian. The story is narrated by the great grandson of Dhanji Govindji. He receives an ancient gunny sack belonging to his great grandmother, which helps him to discover the past and the consequences of the migration of the family movement from Porbandar, India to Zanzibar, Africa. The narrator, Salim Juma recalls the story of the migration of his family and the hardship of his mother, Kulsum (wife of Husein). Moving through the history, Salim discusses his unfulfilled love with Amina (a political activist). His love got failed due to different races, which is not accepted by the narrator’s family. Salim escapes to Abroad after Amina gets arrested, leaving his wife and daughter. This chapter will be exploring the complex and changing paradigms of sexual relationship between the natives and the Indians from the colonial period to the post-colonial

period. The story is narrated by Salim Juma, aka Kala Juma, who inherits the gunny sack that leads him into a deep connection to his family's past. This paper focusses on Vassanji's portrayal of the female characters and their use as metaphors.

This novel discusses the significant role of the body in association with the "new homeland" of the Indian migrants in Africa from the colonial to the post-colonial era. The sack is narrated as 'Shehrazade' or 'Shehru' of Arabian Nights, tells the dark secrets of dislocation, the burdens of the past, identity crisis, sexual encounters related to the narrator's family. In his use of female characters, Vassanji's ideological and literary strategy in both narratives comes very close to what Quayson calls 'symbolization' (82). The novel is divided into three sections; Ji Bai (great grandmother), Kulsum and Amina.

The novel is introduced with Dhanji Govindji arriving in Mutamu (present day Tanzania) from India in the 1900s. He reaches Zanzibar in 1985 due to a "community conflict" in the native land which forced him to migrate and seek his fortune in Zanzibar. The Mukhi offered him a slave named Bibi Taratibu, with whom Govindji had a child named Husein afterwards. Bibi is objectified and used as a source of pleasure. This union of India and Africa leads to a hybrid product named Huseini, which looms the larger sections of the novel. It also shows the gendered powered relationship from post-colonial feminist perspective, leading to her colonization in her own land. There is a complete silence about Bibi throughout the novel, her silence is juxtaposed with Govindji's success.

Bibi Taratibu ultimately had to leave after Dhanji brought his wife Fatima. The narrator says she was 'given as a gift for cold nights, was so used and discarded, and then disappeared' (40). She moved to the outskirts of the village, where she used to sell tea and sweets. The gender-power relationship under the colonial rule keeps her in a permanent silence. Husein lived with his father and step mother, Fatima. Her refrain reveals her to be a bigoted racist. We are told that she would say, 'See. Arab blood runs through my veins, I have Shirazi ancestors, look at my skin, see how different it is from yours' (28). S.S Gill makes an important observation:

The dilemma of Dhanji to reject the mother yet to retain the son is symptomatic of the expatriate negotiations in an alien land. The old discourses of rootedness and origin crack up under the strain of supplanting narrative of exile. (2010 235)

Huseini, being a hybrid of "half-caste" suffers a lot but cannot claim his privilege in the society same as her mother, Bibi Taratibu. His body leaves him no way out as being a half-caste, he is criticized in the society and is not accepted in the new homeland. Huseini is married to Moti, an orphan and later becomes father to a son, Juma. Huseini flees from the home but Dhanji makes every possible effort to bring his half-African son, leading to his own destruction (capitally as well as physically). Dhanji's grief and fruitless journey affected his business and reputation, as well as was murdered mysteriously afterwards. The cause of his death is a shady affair that might have been tied to Govindji:

Shamsi community in India had been torn apart by a strife a few years back. Various parties came into existence during that extreme condition leading to a contradictory set of traditional beliefs, claiming to represent the entire community. The bone of contention among those Shia, Sunni, Sufis and Vedantic factions became the funds collector in the small centres and mosques. The strife has resulted in murders in Mumbai and Zanzibar. And how it seemed in Mutamu... Govindji was buried with full honors by the village of Matamu, carried in a procession of males headed by Shamsi, Bhatia and Swahili elders to the grave. (48-49)

The impact of the conflict and disharmony outside Mutamu in India is intimately connected with Matamu itself. The tragedy of Dhanji haunts the later generations, and the family is displaced again and again, uprooted and homeless. Gulaam (son of Dhanji) is forced to migrate to another place due to the threat of British attack. The search of new home-land intensifies the dilemma of dislocation and homelessness.

Kulsum, the grand daughter-in-law of Govindji is discussed as a central character in the next section. This section covers the struggles and challenges faced by her due to her gender-role, i.e., being a woman. Kulsum is married to Juma, Huseini's son. Juma is like his father, "the dark of the Indian, the persistent brown-dark of sedimented coffee that refuses to whiten any amount of milk." (71) Juma lived early phase of his life like an orphan, an orphan child to an orphan mother. Juma also follows his father's trend and escapes from the house for 3 years, Hasan brings him back for the prestige and honor of the family and offered him a job. Later on he is married to Kulsum. She suffers a lot after marrying an orphan, a half-caste and even herself being a humble natured too. Gender role has been a significant factor throughout her life. But the desire of becoming a mother develops guts in her. Begum, the first child of Kulsum was born after a long wait of seven years and a plenty of sacrifices too. The family is soon disturbed by the rising African nationalism, and beginning to an atmosphere of turmoil and disputes under the Mau-Rebellion with a very dreadful and painful impact on the inhabitants. Meanwhile Juma dies of heart attack and the family sails to Dar es Salaam "The heaven a peace." (96)

Salim Juma takes over the narration from his mother, recalling his own childhood, his mother's store, Habib Mansion, his school days, the beauty of pristine English teacher, Miss Penny at primary school. The novel is narrated largely by its male protagonists who, supposedly, attempt to capitalize on the subaltern experiences of women. It is interesting that male characters such as Dhanji Govindji, Huseini and even the illiterate Salim Juma are given spaces in which they either become narrators or at least focalisers. Vassanji's use of Juma as the focaliser is evidently motivated by his intention to expose the patronising nature of colonial logic in which 'native women and their bodies are described in terms of the promise and the fear of the colonial land' (Loomba 151). Despite the fact that in the first half of the narrative Kulsum's silent presence is pervasive, Vassanji's use of Salim Juma as the focaliser disempowers the female characters. Salim more specifically talks about the struggle of Kulsum in raising her children. She shows a great courage by leading the house alone along with saving her reputation. Kulsum grew tough gradually along with the passing time, more specifically outwards, breaking down the role of the body in a gendered representation and the stigma imposed by the patriarchy. He describes his widowed mother as: 'But as the days wore on she toughened, became less sentimental – the flesh sagged, the bones thickened, the lips thinned into the hardened, marmalade-guzzling old woman she is today' (93). Here Salim indicates, how the challenges and problems derived changes in her body and turned her as hard as a man should be.

Kulsum's family also got struck to the political disharmony and the prevalent racial tensions and nationalist rioting. Many members of the community left the country for new homes in England, United States and Canada. She lived with Sona and Kala (Salim) in Habib Mansion. The straight forward story of Kulsum is counter balanced with the stories of others females characters of the novel. Mzee Pipa's sister is a penniless single women who is abandoned by her brother and is left with no choice other than begging at the mosque. Pipa has only one son Amin, after a long wait of seven daughters. Hoping for a son, she gives birth to a child after a long wait of seven years. In Kulsum's case again gender is playing a significant role for her, once a flower, but after marriage a "hemorrhoid sufferer".

All except one or two daughters were unhappy in marriage, some were married into poverty, one to a milkman and the other one to a drunkard. The life of a women gets harder after this, the more you try to hide your shame and disappointment the more it is difficult to think of divorce. The outer and the inner self of the female gets distorted by the physical and the mental torture received from the partners end. (159)

The third part of the novel is named after Amina, an African girl and the narrator's unfulfilled love and the circle of the story is completed. The story opens with the black slave Bibi Tarabitu and ends with Amina's fierce sense of freedom. Salim meets Amina at the National Service at Uhuru Camp, to endow military training and political awareness for motivating youth, it had an everlasting impression on him. Salim's title Juma, an African name and his black color from Bibi Tarabitu compelled him to attend the camp for six months. Nobody wants to go to this place and despite of the pleas from the narrator's family, he is sent to the

farthest camp in Northern Tanzania. He faces constant humiliation and ill treatment on the basis of his Asian origin by Tanzanian Government. Salim and Amina's affair arises the issue of racial discrimination. Edwards, Kulsum's representative forbids him to continue his relationship with Amina, because, "Africans and Asians are different." (257) Once a student-activist she now matures into a crowd pulling adult politicians:

Life without politics was an illusion; so was the commitment without civism. She gave two lectures when she came back; one on *Politics and the African Novel*, the other on *Feminism and Africa*. She established a good following in a very quick succession of time. (286)

Amina holds the centre, she is the centre of all the activities around her. Issac Ndlovu observes that Amina in America "becomes the transmogrified Bibi Taratibu, a new caliber of brave African female politician who challenges all manner of exploitation and oppression. Her defiance is further demonstrated when she comes back from America a feminist, with a white boyfriend." (93) Still seeing her through Salim's eyes, Amina is described as having experienced a rebirth in America. 'So radical she looked, so eclectic was her knowledge, so much authority was exuded by kitenge maxi dresses and the Afro hairstyle – immediately, she established a following' (250). Her followings kept on increasing and included teachers, poets, Indian Africans and overseas students. Amina enjoys her freedom unlike Bibi, who had no freedom. Vassanji's depiction of Amina suggests a problematically linear understanding of history. Starting with the docile and almost speechless Bibi Taratibu and Kulsum the liberation of women apparently reaches its pinnacle when the black (Amina) women have either attended an American university or have lived in London for some years. She played a dominant role in her relationship with Salim, completely opposite to the role of Bibi as a sex slave to Govindji. Amina's view regarding cohabitation of Indians and Africans got changed when she returned from England. She makes a boyfriend, Mark (a white man). Later on Amina is charged with the conspiracy to overthrow the government, and eventually sent her to prison. Salim gets frightened and escapes to Abroad.

The novel ends with dejected Salim in a basement of a flat in Canada, and the last memory out of the gunny sack, hoping that he will be his family's last migrant. His innermost feeling is entrapped in the last paragraph of the last chapter of *The Gunny Sack*:

The running must now Amina. The cycle of escape and rebirth, uprooting and regeneration, must cease in me. Let this be the last run away, returned, with one last, quixotic dream. We had our dreams, little one, we dreamt the world, which was large and beautiful and exciting... (308)

The concluding part of *The Gunny Sack* indicated the harsh and troublesome experience of the Asian-Africans of the East Africa during the colonial period, and even the changing gender role has also been taken in consideration. Most of the female characters are either silenced by the narrative or they are stereotypically presented in the narrative. Only Amina is given relatively extensive narrative space, Fatima and Kulsum are stereotypical characters. Salim's brief affair with Amina shows the barriers of 'race' and 'class' in the post-independent nation. There is an enigmatic discrimination and differences in the racial categories of Amina and Salim. Amina puts up a question mark on Salim's Identity and the reality of the role of Indians and Africans:

Why do you call me "Indian"? I too am an African. I was born here, my father was born here even my grandfather! (242)

Salim claims Africa as his homeland but Amina feels herself as an indigenous African. A new type of domination is symbolized by the love affair of Salim and Amina which intensifies the echoes of Africa and India. By the role reversal of the characters, it signifies that the aggressive male sexuality will have to bow down as the days of sexual slavery are over. Through Bibi the author is exploring the Afro-Indian community's troubled relationship with Black Africans. Kulsum has been portrayed as a stereotypical woman like the other female characters of the novel other than Amina, a woman rendered irrational by widowhood and a victim of feminine myopia. The other female characters like Fatima (Huseini's mother) and Remti are the least entertained throughout the novel. Fatima is portrayed as an evil stepmother to Huseini with a mindset of racial superiority and acclaims:

Tell me, what is my sin, that I should inherit this slave's son with my marriage... bad influence on my children, ruining their good name. (28)

Salim talks about the cunning nature of her and her malicious character due to which Huseini flees from the home. Her characters has also been established as a challenge towards the patriarchy. Her refrain reveals her to be a bigoted racist. We are told that she would say, 'See. Arab blood runs through my veins, I have Shirazi ancestors, look at my skin, see how different it is from yours' (28). Salim, the narrator of the novel fortunately meets his great grandmother Ji Bai and kickoffs a new journey towards the history of his past generations. He says:

Ji Bai opened a small window into that dark past for me... A world of my great-grandmother who left India and my great grandfather who was African, the world of Mutamu where India and Africa met and the mixture exploded in the person of my half-caste grandfather Huseini who disappeared in the forest one day and never returned,... (154-55)

The *Gunny Sack* also signals the allegorical use of Ji Bai. The story opens a few weeks after her death in Canada. The name of the great grandmother, Ji Bai is a symbolical one. It is her nickname, as she always replied with the answer, "Ji ha, Yes sir" whenever called by her husband or father. The novel is carried forward alongside Ji Bai and her gunny sack that is later on inherited by her great grandson, Salim Juma. The irony is that Ji Bai has to die in order to her story to be told by a male benefactor.

The last chapter of the novel, "and the last flight" is in fact the narrator's flight from the African past and about the ends of the flights made in the future. The past cannot be overlooked as it contains the roots of our region. Through the gunny sack, the narrator recalls the past events of his family in the history. He recollects the past events through the objects inherited from the gunny sack and links it with proper ends to establish the history and the diasporic experience of the family.

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. (2011 7)

This novel designates to critique and justify the consequences of racism, colonization and decolonization of nations. Vassanji as a novelist bears the lived experience of migration, immigration, racism and ambivalence in his own life. Due to this, he excels in portraying the crucial and complex picture of the consequent changes in the lives of different people of different races, castes, religions etc. It is a story of a historical representation of a family's migration from India to Mutamu (presently known as Tanzania), East Africa in 1985 due to the outburst of the communal riots in their native place. This novel deals with the sufferings, agony, hybridization, dislocation, oppression, identity crisis, etc. of the family of the narrator for past three generations. In this paper, the differences associated with the gender, race, color, body, etc. in the new home-land has been discussed quite relevantly. The female characters have been kept quite throughout the novel, letting them a very limited space to live their lives on their own except for Amina. Through Amina Vassanji has tried to raise voice against the female oppression in the patriarchal society. Characters like Bibi, Kulsum, Fatima, Remti, etc. have been portrayed as passive sufferers, not raising any voice against their oppression. Gender is playing a very crucial role in story of the novel. The crux of the novel is the significance of the body in association of the new home-land in the form of gender, race and color. This trauma of migration into a completely new land with a completely different culture, race, color, habitation, etc. and the sufferings have been represented by Vassanji in his novel, with the history of the family being discussed sideways. The characters like Husein and Salim have been shown suffering due their caste and color in East Africa, the problems coming in uprooting and settling to a new land with new cultures and social norms. The female characters have also been portrayed in a manner to question their role and place in that patriarchal society and the history of East Africa. Characters like Bibi Taratibu, Kulsum, Amina are kept silent throughout the novel, letting a very few chances to express themselves and raising voices for them. The body which was confined to a gendered role is now breaking the shackles as well as the stigma of patriarchy and Salim describes this in his own style: 'But as the days wore on she toughened, became less sentimental – the flesh sagged, the bones thickened, the lips thinned into the hardened, marmalade-guzzling old woman she is today' (107). Despite what Malak calls Vassanji's 'vibrant, affectionate depiction of ... characters' (1), most of the female characters are either silenced by the narrative or they

are stereotypically presented in the narrative. Right from the beginning of the novel, i.e., from Bibi Taratibu to Fatima females have been confined in a gender role. Bibi has been used as an object for comfort on lonely, breezy African nights by Dhanji Govindji while Fatima, an African girl whose love affair with the narrator was rejected by the narrator's family due to the difference in the race but Vassanji has represented her stronger than other female characters in the novel. Fatima has been portrayed with a fierce sense of freedom and appealing nature. The complete novel is the portrayal of a family's sufferings and history. This is of paramount importance, especially since the whole novel is structured around women. In addition to exposing women's multiple subaltern positions, Vassanji's narratives exacerbate their powerlessness by manufacturing typical women and then representing them in a manner that intensifies their voicelessness. Vassanji's *The Gunny Sack* presents strength, endurance and resilience of woman protagonists, who hold the familial world and prevent it from disintegrating or breaking down. His woman characters are the upholders of tradition on one hand and change and renewal on the other, in the form of Jibai, Kulsum and Amina.

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