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Review of "The Gunny Sack" by Ahmad Harb

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Review · Ahmad Harb

Memory, Ji Bai would say, is this old sack here, this poor dear that nobody has any use for any more. Stroking the sagging brown shape with affection she would drag it closer, to sit at her feet like a favourite child. In would plunge her hand through the gaping hole of a mouth, and she would rummage inside. Now you feel this thing here, you fondle that one, you bring out this naughty little nut and everything else in it re-arranges itself. (63)

THESE OPENING LINES capture the narrative techniques and the theme of *The Gunny Sack*, an African novel by M. G. Vassanji from Tanzania. The drab gunny sack which Salim Juma Huseni, the main character and narrator (nicknamed Kala), is bequeathed from his mystical grand-aunt, Ji Bai, offers the author a narrative method approximating in its function the stream-of-consciousness technique in the modern psychological novel and Proust's "involuntary memory" in *A La Recherche du Temps Perdu*. It offers him a method to excavate the past—the family roots of Salim Juma, the Ismaili community, and along with that the past of the East African nation of Tanzania.

The gunny sack is nicknamed Shehrbanoo, a comic combination of Shehrazade and Shehriyar. Although we are cautioned about the misunderstanding (the drab gunny sack is no more Shehrazade than Salim Juma is Prince Shehriyar), this allusion reveals the influence of the Arab storytelling traditions. The influence is so pervasive that *The Gunny Sack* can justly be nicknamed (since everything in the novel has a nickname) "The Thousand Nights and a Night" of East Africa, but ironically devoid of the romantic ambience and optimism of the original:

It [the gunny sack] sits beside me, 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. (115)

M. G. Vassanji. *The Gunny Sack*. Heineman, London, 1989. 276 pp. U.S. \$7.95.

To intensify this storytelling tradition, Vassanji employs the character of Edward bin Hadith, a wandering storyteller who, as his name signifies (Hadith is the Arabic word for story or discourse), makes a story of everything regardless of how trivial it is. Artistically, the character of Edward bin Hadith complements the narrative and the symbolic function of the gunny sack. If the gunny sack represents the collective memory of the Ismaili community experience, Edward bin Hadith—a black African—represents the personalized memory, the externalization of the community sense of restlessness and nameless anomie and perhaps the search for identity.

Edward bin Hadith is also a father figure. This is of paramount importance, especially since the whole novel is structured around women. The father escapes or dies suddenly and the little children remain with the mother. Thus, the gunny sack which Salim Juma has inherited from his grandaunt, in addition to its function as a symbol of the “collective memory,” may easily be identified with the “feminine principle,” representing its various associations of the feminine protection, the womb, and hence rebirth.

The Gunny Sack is a novel of escape, wanderlust and rootlessness that afflict so many peoples in the Shamsi, a fictional device for “Ismaili” community in East Africa. It is also a novel of soul-searching, self-realization, and rebirth. Dhanji Govindji, Salim’s great-ancestor, flees the Shamsi community of Junapur, India, to Matamu, Zanzibar, for a better life. In Matamu and with the help of Mukhi Ragavji Devraji, the Shamsi community leader, he establishes his business as a local agent for the firm of Amarsi Makan. One “cold night,” and upon the advice of the mukhi, he sleeps with his slave black woman, Bibi Taratibu, just to warm his bed. The result of that adulterous passion is Huseni, a half-caste. Suffering the humiliation and social degradation for being a half-caste in his own father’s family, Huseni disappears, never to return, leaving his wife, Moti, and child, Juma. Moti marries twice after the disappearance of Huseni. She takes the four-year-old Juma with her to Kenya to live with her third husband. She dies in childbirth and her husband packs off the children—three daughters and Juma—to her sister Awal in Nairobi. As if the sin of the grandfather is visited upon the father and the grandson, Juma lives in the household of Hassam Pirbhai, the aunt’s husband, as a half-caste, a slave boy running errands for Awal’s sons, skinning the deer, and cleaning the

meat. One day, Juma disappears. After three years, and as he tries to stow away in one of the steamers to India, he is identified and locked up by an agent. Hassan Pirbhai agrees to pay his fare back just to “hide the family’s shame.”

Back in Nairobi, Pirbhai and Awal arrange for his marriage to Kulsum, a Mombasi girl of humble origin. A daughter (Begum) and two sons (Salim and Jamal) are eventually born to them. Time passes. Juma’s family moves to Dar es Salaam. Juma dies suddenly. And as if the wanderlust runs in the blood of the family, Begum runs away with her teacher to London and Jamal flees to Boston.

Salim also runs away leaving his wife, Zuleika, and only daughter, Amina. But at this crucial juncture of time, Salim stops to examine “the collective memory,” the gunny sack, the incoherent accretion of stories over generations. He significantly realizes that there is a price being paid for every runaway. Dhanji Govindji lost his self-respect and sanity; Huseni, the joys and security of community life; Juma, “the compassion for those of whom he was also a part.” In a key passage towards the end of the novel, Salim Juma, while addressing his daughter, decided that “the running must stop now. The cycle of escape and rebirth, uprooting and re-generation, must cease in me.” Perhaps in this last runaway, as Salim Juma contends, lies redemption, a faith in the future “to pick up the pieces of our wounded selves, our wounded dreams” (268).

In the world of Vassanji’s novel, death mercilessly pushes its way into the characters’ lives, assuming the forms of murders, massacres, heart-attacks, acts of revenge, and random accidents. What is noteworthy about death in *The Gunny Sack* is that it is in many cases retributive, striking unexpectedly as a fulfillment of the long-awaited poetic justice. This is particularly apparent in Dhanji Govindji’s mysterious murder, Juma’s untimely death, and Gulam’s (the missionary’s) road accident.

The Gunny Sack opens a window into the “dark past” of Salim Juma, but as it does so “the whole world flew in” — the world of changing Africa where Europe, Asia, and Africa meet. The meeting is a collision. The results are explosive, not only in the lives of men but also in the life of the whole continent of Africa. Families are uprooted, businesses are looted and burned to the ground, troops (Portuguese, German, British, and African) maraud bequeathing death, destruction and misery. As Salim Juma rummages inside his mystical gunny sack, we see the ugly world of

slavery, colonialism, and misguided revolutions. We share with the various communities their struggles for survival and freedom while pitifully, although understandably, clinging to their superstitions, traditions, myths, and heritage. The two pasts—Salim’s and that of the continent—in interaction form the knotty vertebrae of Vassanji’s novel. In this regard, the novel also has usefulness as a reference book on the history and the political evolution of East Africa.

The Gunny Sack is a skillfully written piece of work. It is as absorbing as the gunny sack itself. It is one that will easily satisfy the needs of those who are new to the world of literature and Africa and one that the experienced reader and the literary critic will find challenging. In addition to the rich symbolism of the gunny sack, the reader will enjoy the humor, the wit, and the intellectual brio. As history keeps everflowing in Salim’s “Shehrbanoo,” we have no escape but to sympathize with and pity cruel humanity and rightly abhor the devastating legacy of colonialism and slavery.

M. G. Vassanji demonstrates an admirable ability to delineate the complexities of an individual character and the dynamics of the political and social forces that shaped the eastern part of Africa. Certainly, *The Gunny Sack* will secure its author a formidable place among the African novelists of today.