



The Gunny Sack

M.G. Vassanji

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Memory, Ji Bai would say, is this old sack here, this poor dear that nobody has any use for any more.

As the novel begins, Salim Juma, in exile from Tanzania, opens up a gunny sack bequeathed to him by a beloved great-aunt. Inside it he discovers the past — his own family's history and the story of the Asian experience in East Africa. Its relics and artefacts bring with them the lives of Salim's Indian great-grandfather, Dhanji Govindji, his extensive family, and all their loves and betrayals.

Dhanji Govindji arrives in Matamu — from Zanzibar, Porbander, and ultimately Junapur — and has a son with an African slave named Bibi Taratibu. Later, growing in prosperity, he marries Fatima, the woman who will bear his other children. But when his half-African son Husein disappears, Dhanji Govindji pays out his fortune in trying to find him again. As the tentacles of the First World War reach into Africa, with the local German colonists fighting British invaders, he spends more and more time searching. One morning he is suddenly murdered: he had spent not just his own money but embezzled that of others to finance the quest for his lost son.

“Well, listen, son of Juma, you listen to me and I shall give you your father Juma and his father Husein and his father...”

Part II of the novel is named for Kulsum, who marries Juma, Husein's son; she is the mother of the narrator, Salim. We learn of Juma's childhood as a second-class member of his stepmother's family after his mother, Moti, dies. After his wedding to Kulsum there is a long wait in the unloving bosom of his stepfamily for their first child, Begum. It is the 1950s, and whispers are beginning of the Mau Mau rebellion.

Among the stories tumbling from the gunny sack comes the tailor Edward bin Hadith's story of the naming of Dar es Salaam, the city Kulsum moves to with her children after her husband's death. And gradually her son takes over the telling, recalling his own childhood. His life guides the narrative from here on. He remembers his mother's store and neighbours' intrigues, the beauty of his pristine English teacher at primary school, cricket matches, and attempts to commune with the ghost of his father. It is a vibrantly described, deeply felt childhood. The nation, meanwhile, is racked by political tensions on its road to independence, which comes about as Salim Juma reaches adolescence. With the surge in racial tension and nationalist rioting, several members of his close-knit community leave the country for England, America, and Canada.

I see this comedy now as an attempt to foil the workings of fate: how else to explain, what else to call, the irrevocable relentless chain of events that unfolded...

The title of Part III, Amina, is the name of Salim's great unfulfilled love, and will also be the name of his daughter. He meets the first Amina while doing his National Service at Camp Uhuru, a place he feels he has been sent to in error. Amina is African, and their relationship inevitably causes his family anxiety, until the increasingly militant Amina leaves for New York. Salim becomes a teacher at his old school, and marries, but keeps a place for Amina in his heart. When she returns and is arrested by the more and more repressive government, Salim is hurriedly exiled abroad. He leaves his wife and daughter with the promise that he will send for them, knowing that he will not. The novel ends with Salim alone, the last memories coming out of the gunny sack, hoping that he will be his family's last runaway.

The Gunny Sack Details

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Hadia says

i wish i had a sack,,,

Clivemichael says

Skillfully articulated, richly detailed story invoking the times and sensations of an Indian diaspora in eastern Africa. The potent sense of anticipation around the various escapes/retreats fleeing the changes of government, attitude and financial challenges were palpable reminders of our fragile place in culture, assimilated or not. Loved the day to day growing up in Dar, the insiders view of various families politics and the progression of the emerging independent state of Tanzania.

Manish says

Written in the form of a memoir, Vassanji explores the trials and tribulations of the Gujarati migrants to Africa through the life of the narrator's great-grandfather and his descendants. Family scandals, love affairs and colourful characters come alive against the canvas of the First World War, the Mau-Mau rebellion and the eventual exodus of the Indian community from Africa.

Rosemary says

While I didn't particularly dig the device of the narrator's great-aunt's gunny sack/Scheharazade motif - I found it weirdly wanky and pretentious - I DID really enjoy hearing three generations worth of stories from East Africa from the point of view of the Indian community. This history of colonization and upheaval is something I knew next to nothing about and it was worth reading just for that.

The style of writing was a little difficult to get into, especially when you're a little wasted on vacation, but once I stopped caring about whether or not I knew who the author was talking about, I found it much easier to read and enjoy - and often, I'd figure out after a page or two which characters we were discussing.

I'm still not entirely sure what happened at the end - where the narrator was writing from and what his plan was - but again, I felt that his personal story wasn't really the point. All in all, a pretty interesting read.

David says

After reading a Naipul book, Half a Life, also about Africa, and seeing a review by the Times comparing Vassanji to Naipul and Graham Greene (one of my favourite writers), I had to read this book. Having said

this, I admit I had some mixed views on this book and the Times review.

I didn't make much connection to Greene other than a story not set in England. Sure there is the point of view of how England affected a former colony, generating (if forced) respect, then hatred. The connection to Naipul is true, as both writers come from the former colonies and have non-traditional view of the mother country (and this makes their writing so good).

This is the story of a man and the country Tanganyka (now Tanzania). The story of this man and his family follows the path of immigration of Indians to East Africa, something I knew very little prior to reading this book. The big "ahah" moment came when he mentions how Idi Amin, woke from a dream and expelled all Indians from Uganda in 1974. This was a time when Canada opened its doors to this immigrants. After reading the book I understand this issue more, especially since I was 15 at the time. Sadly there was a lot of discrimination resulting during this period and it saddened me even more realizing what had happened.

The story begins and ends with the gunny sack....kind of a "bag full of stories" told by an aging woman. I liked this premise of the Scheharazade motif but, as the story unfolded, it seemed to get more complicated. Vassanji throws in various Hindi and Sanskrit making it more complicated. There is a dictionary at the back but I found this too distracting from the tale. I also wished that some of the tales were a little longer. There were so many that I skimmed some of them which is too bad, as I saw the importance of this rarely written part of the world. In the end, I found myself thinking of Garcia Marquez for breadth of the entire picture (spanning decades) and only wishing the tales were fewer but more developed. Overall I am glad I read this book.

Andrea says

Read this many years ago and reread it to see if it was as good as I remembered. It's definitely still one of my favorite books set in East Africa. This is the story of an extended Asian family who live in Tanzania. The story covers several generations, but mainly through the eyes of the narrator, which helps keep it coherent. Lively characters and a humorous touch kept me wondering what would happen next. There is also sadness and disappointment in the story, but it is always kept light and somewhat distant. It really does read like listening to family tales from an elder relative. Wonderfully rich and gentle.

Claire says

This was ok. Not as good as The In Between World of Vikram Lal though...read it if you are particularly interested in East Africa or the Indian diaspora in Africa.

Vanessa says

This was one of the most readable university books I ever came across. I really enjoyed the different episodes of the different times in the lives of this particular family and their involvement in all the political circumstances they have lived under. The progression from one kind of power to various others was really interesting and gave an insight into the struggles East Africa faced in the past century or so. It becomes

increasingly hard to decide who plays the role of a colonial power and if it has only ever been the Europeans in this part of the world.

The development of culture and the influences that are important to this was the most interesting theme of the novel for me. Some passages concerning that made me cringe while reading because it was so horrible to co-experience some scenes. Overall, I would really recommend anyone interested in colonial and postcolonial topics or just in East Africa generally to read Vassanji's novel.

Shaila says

There are only a few writers who can successfully tie together a huge narrative spanning several generations of large families in three countries with a compelling plot and theme. Vassanji tries, but somehow misses the mark. He does, however, write beautiful setting and character sketches. It's a decent story, just a little scattered and tedious at times.

Dyan says

Another great writer. I've read his other books but found this one to be more challenging. There is a pantheon of characters across generations with names and relationships I had difficulty keeping track of. The failure is mine, not the writer's. This book requires attention and a willingness to look back a few pages and retrace your steps. Nonetheless, a beautifully crafted story.

Kristine Morris says

Persevered, but I don't know why. This book was boring and not at all engaging. I enjoyed *The Assassin's Song* by MG Vassanji, so I thought I was in for a good read. Because I only gave this a one star rating I feel somewhat compelled to give examples as to why I did not like the book. I'll say two things. First, Vassanji was unable to teach the reader about the history of the Asian experience in East Africa through the fictitious family saga. Instead you read through pages of a history essay followed by a weak segue to the story within the book. The story did not start until about page 150 and throughout the whole book I wasn't even actually very sure who the main character was - a sign of the confusing writing style and my lack of interest perhaps.

Secondly, this book is hard to understand if you don't share the same heritage background and growing up circumstances as the author. While it's not the author's role to spell everything out to his or her readers, some context would be helpful. For example, say I wrote the following: "So after dinner we all went to Hartleys. Hartleys!! Bliss on a hot summer's eve."

Does that make any sense to you? Of course not. Unless you grew up in St. Lambert on the south shore of Montreal in the 1970s. But if I wrote, "So after dinner we all went to Hartleys. Hartleys!! With 75 cents in your pocket you could get a huge ice cream cone with real cherries. It wasn't just an ice cream shop, it was THE ice cream shop and the added bonus was the scary haunted garage right across the street which local kids would dare each other to enter. Bliss on a hot summer's eve."

Okay, so now you know what Hartleys deserves two exclamation marks. So much of what I read in this novel was like the first example - I had no idea what memories or emotions Vassanji was trying to evoke because he just did not give me enough context.

Finally - I realize this is a third point - you either go all the way with a metaphoric speaking gunny sack or you don't use it at all.

Siria says

Good, but one of those books which requires a second or third reading in order to understand its complicated mix of characters, relationships and events. I'm not sure that Vassanji's prose is quite good enough to make me want to devote all that additional time to this book, but it's still worth the read, if only for the fictionalised introduction it gives to the history of Indian settlers in eastern Africa.

Sue says

actually, didn't finish it. Found it kind of boring, and lost interest. Took it back to library. Just could not get "into it".

Joanne says

A slice of life from the point of view of an East African of Indian background.

Kathy Karchuk says

Couldn't finish this book ... gave it 150 pages
