



The Gunny Sack

By 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.

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Editorial Review

From Library Journal

This first novel by a Nairobi-born writer raised in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania celebrates the spirit of Asian pioneers, Muslims from India who moved to East Africa in the early 1900s. Living under German colonial rule, the family of Dhanji Govindji become permanent residents of Africa while witnessing historical events that result in the birth of African nationalism. Vassanji has created a family memoir, a coming-of-age story that looks at the past with affection and understanding. He shows that the hopes and dreams of Indian immigrants were essentially the same as those of Europeans who passed through Ellis Island: education for their children and a more prosperous future for the next generation.

- *Dean Willms, Fort Collins P.L., Col.*

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Review

“Vassanji is one of the country’s finest storytellers.”

—*Quill & Quire*

“Vassanji captures a wide and authentic perspective that ranks with V. S. Naipaul and Graham Greene.”

—*The Times* (London)

About the Author

M.G. Vassanji was born in Kenya, and raised in Tanzania. He took a doctorate in physics at M.I.T. and came to Canada in 1978. While working as a research associate and lecturer at the University of Toronto in the 1980s he began to dedicate himself seriously to a longstanding passion, writing.

His first novel, **The Gunny Sack**, won a regional Commonwealth Writers Prize and he was invited to be writer-in-residence at the University of Iowa. The novel’s success was a spur, Vassanji has commented: “It was translated into several languages. I was confident that this was what I could do, that writing was not just wishful thinking. In 1989 I quit my full-time job and began researching **The Book of Secrets**.” That celebrated, bestselling novel won the inaugural Giller prize, in 1994.

Vassanji’s other books include the acclaimed novels **No New Land** (1991) and **Amriika** (1999), and **Uhuru Street**, a collection of stories. His unique place in Canadian literature comes from his elegant, classical style, his narrative reach, and his interest in characters trying to reconcile different worlds within themselves. The subtle relations of the past and present are also constants in his writing: “When someone asks you where you are from or who you are, there is a whole résumé of who you are. I know very few people who do not have a past to explain. That awareness is part of my work.”

M.G. Vassanji was awarded the Harbourfront Festival Prize in 1994 in recognition of his achievement in and contribution to the world of letters, and was in the same year chosen as one of twelve Canadians on *Macleans*’s Honour Roll. In 2003 he became the first writer to win the Giller Prize twice, when his bestselling novel **The In-Between World of Vikram Lall** gained the award. M.G. Vassanji lives in Toronto with his wife and two sons.

Users Review

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David Pimentel:

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Karina McDermott:

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