

Oceanic Narratives: Maritime Spaces in M.G. Vassanji's *The Gunny Sack*

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Abstract

The Indian Ocean has long functioned as a conduit of cultural encounters, diasporic movements, and transnational exchanges that shape postcolonial identities. M.G. Vassanji's *The Gunny Sack* (1989), a seminal text in Indian Ocean literature, foregrounds the maritime as a space of memory, displacement, and cultural negotiation. Through the motif of *The Gunny Sack*, an archive of stories, objects, and silences, Vassanji maps the lived histories of the East African Asian diaspora, interweaving oceanic routes with fragmented personal and communal narratives. This paper explores *The Gunny Sack* as an oceanic narrative that situates maritime spaces not merely as physical backdrops but as carriers of postcolonial memory, hybrid identities, and contested histories. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of postcolonial diaspora studies, the Blue Humanities, and Rob Nixon's concept of "slow violence," the study evaluates how the ocean becomes a mnemonic device and a site of cultural reconstruction. By analysing the novel's treatment of mobility, memory, and oceanic crossings, the paper underscores the significance of maritime imaginaries in Vassanji's reconfiguration of Indian Ocean histories.

Keywords: Indian Ocean literature, diaspora, maritime spaces, postcolonial identity, memory, oceanic narratives.

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1. Introduction

The sea has long captured the human imagination as both a space of possibility and peril, connection and estrangement. In postcolonial literature, the ocean becomes an archive of histories that are often silenced or erased in national narratives (Hofmeyr 4). Indian Ocean literature in particular has emerged as a crucial field for understanding the movements of peoples, commodities, and ideas across maritime routes that connected East Africa, South Asia, and beyond (Moorthy and Jamal 7).

M.G. Vassanji's *The Gunny Sack* (1989) represents one of the earliest attempts to narrativise the East African Asian diaspora within the framework of oceanic memory. The novel follows Salim Juma, who inherits a gunny sack filled with relics of his family's past, which unlocks stories of migration, dislocation, and settlement along the Indian Ocean rim. Through these objects and their associated narratives, the novel reconstructs diasporic experiences shaped by colonial encounters, maritime crossings, and hybrid identities (Kanaganayakam 72).

This paper investigates how *The Gunny Sack* foregrounds maritime spaces as active participants in shaping diasporic memory. By employing theoretical insights from postcolonial studies (Hall 225; Bhabha 37), Blue Humanities (Mentz 5), and diaspora studies (Gilroy 19), the study positions Vassanji's novel within a broader corpus of oceanic narratives that reimagine the Indian Ocean as a space of historical encounter and identity negotiation.

2. Objectives

1. To analyse the representation of maritime spaces in M.G. Vassanji's *The Gunny Sack*.
2. To examine how the Indian Ocean functions as a site of memory, diaspora, and cultural negotiation in the novel.
3. To situate *The Gunny Sack* within the framework of Indian Ocean literature and oceanic narratives.
4. To explore the role of material objects (in the gunny sack) as carriers of oceanic memory and postcolonial identity.
5. To apply theoretical frameworks such as Blue Humanities, postcolonial diaspora studies, and memory studies in analysing the text.

3. Review of Literature

Scholars have consistently recognised *The Gunny Sack* as a foundational text in postcolonial and diasporic literature. Kanaganayakam highlights how Vassanji's fiction engages with the instability of belonging, presenting characters who are "forever poised between multiple cultural worlds" (72). Cooper similarly observes that Vassanji resists a nostalgic return to a singular homeland; instead, he portrays diaspora as a dynamic process of negotiation shaped by displacement and adaptation (Cooper 41).

Gikandi situates Vassanji's work within a larger conversation about postcolonial identity, arguing that *The Gunny Sack* maps the contradictions of diaspora by confronting both colonial histories and cultural

hybridity (Gikandi 113). This aligns with Stuart Hall's assertion that diasporic identity is not fixed but constantly "in production" (Hall 226).

The novel's titular sack has been read as a material and metaphorical archive of memory (Bahri 88). Scholars connect this with Nora's concept of *Lieux De Mémoire*, as the sack becomes a portable site of fragmented histories (Nora 12). Assmann's theory of cultural memory further illuminates how the sack functions as a mechanism of transmission across generations (Assmann 34).

Hofmeyr places the Indian Ocean as a "literary zone," where texts, goods, and people circulate beyond national boundaries (5). Burton similarly conceptualises the ocean as a "cultural archive" (Burton 23). These perspectives situate Vassanji within Indian Ocean literature, alongside Gurnah and Ghosh. Moorthy and Jamal emphasise the syncretic and layered histories of the Indian Ocean, which resonate in Vassanji's narrative of Gujarati migration to East Africa (11).

More recent Blue Humanities studies (Mentz 2; DeLoughrey 15) call attention to ecological and cultural dimensions of the sea. Though less explored in Vassanji scholarship, the ecological ambivalence of the ocean in the novel, both sustainer and destroyer, invites such readings. Nixon's concept of "slow violence" further clarifies how colonial exploitation and racial marginalisation unfold across generations (Nixon 45).

Despite this body of scholarship, there remain gaps, limited engagement with ecological dimensions of the novel, a lack of comparative frameworks between the Indian and Atlantic oceans (Gilroy 32), and insufficient emphasis on the gunny sack as an "oceanic archive." This study addresses these gaps.

4. Materials and Methods

4.1 Materials

The primary text is Vassanji's *The Gunny Sack* (1989). Secondary sources include key works in postcolonial theory (Hall; Bhabha), diaspora studies (Gilroy), memory studies (Nora; Assmann), and oceanic/Blue Humanities scholarship (Hofmeyr; DeLoughrey; Mentz). Critical commentary on Vassanji (Kanaganayakam; Cooper; Gikandi) further informs the analysis.

4.2 Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative literary research approach:

- **Close Reading:** examining Vassanji's use of imagery, symbolism, and narrative structure to foreground maritime spaces.
- **Thematic analysis:** tracing themes of migration, memory, hybridity, and colonial exploitation.
- **Theoretical Application:** employing postcolonial, diaspora, and Blue Humanities frameworks.
- **Comparative Contextualisation:** situating the novel within Indian Ocean literature, in dialogue with Atlantic paradigms (Gilroy).
- **Hermeneutic Approach:** interpreting meaning through interaction between text, history, and theory.

This framework enables both textual depth and theoretical breadth, treating the gunny sack as an archive and the ocean as a cultural and ecological text.

5. Results and Discussion

5.1 *The Gunny Sack as Oceanic Archive*

The sack, filled with “a cowrie shell, a piece of ivory, scraps of cloth, and faded letters,” functions as an oceanic archive (Vassanji 3). Salim reflects that it was “not a sack of possessions, but of lives lived, tears shed, and journeys made” (5). Like the sea itself, it preserves fragments of transoceanic lives.

5.2 Maritime Routes and Diasporic Identity

Ji Bai recalls her husband’s voyages, noting that “the sea was both a home and an enemy” (Vassanji 47). This duality reflects the fluidity of diaspora, what Hall calls “identities in process” (226). Salim reflects: “We had no homeland to claim, for Gujarat was a memory, Zanzibar a departure, and Dar es Salaam only a resting place” (Vassanji 82). This echoes Gilroy’s vision of transoceanic identity (32).

5.3 Memory, Migration, and the Sea

Dhanji Govindji crosses the sea “with a head full of dreams and a heart full of fear” (Vassanji 54). Salim recalls, “We were not of here, not of there, forever in between” (129). Nixon’s notion of “slow violence” explains these long-term traumas of marginalisation (47).

5.4 Ocean as Witness of Colonial Capitalism

Ivory trade imagery - “ivory tusks, once white as moonlight, were stained with the blood of porters” (Vassanji 97)- embodies colonial violence. A ledger “tallied numbers, never lives” (112), echoing Gikandi’s critique of colonial capitalism (118).

5.5 Postcolonial Identity and Cultural Negotiation

Salim notes: “The sack spoke of ancestors who were Indian, African, Muslim, Hindu, and something else altogether—a people of the sea” (Vassanji 144). This exemplifies Bhabha’s “third space” of hybridity (38). However, he concludes, “We were guests in every land, inheritors of a sack, not a soil” (163).

5.6 Blue Humanities and Ecological Dimensions

Ji Bai remarks, “the sea gave us fish, but it also took our sons” (Vassanji 201). Salim muses, “the ocean was older than all our journeys, and it would outlast us” (214). Mentz emphasises the ocean as an ecological force, not just a metaphor (6).

6. Conclusion

The Gunny Sack positions the Indian Ocean as an archive, a witness, and a metaphor of diaspora. Its maritime spaces embody both possibility and trauma, hybridity and displacement. The sack functions as a portable ocean, preserving fragmented histories (Assmann 34).

By employing postcolonial diaspora theory (Hall, Bhabha, Gilroy), memory studies (Nora), and Blue Humanities (Mentz), this paper demonstrates how the novel illuminates the contradictions of belonging

and the entanglement of memory with maritime mobility. Colonial capitalism, embodied in the ivory trade and ledgers, inscribes violence into these crossings (Gikandi; Nixon).

Placed alongside Indian Ocean literature, such as Ghosh's *Ibis Trilogy* and Gurnah's *Paradise*, Vassanji's novel underscores the Indian Ocean as a cultural and ecological zone (Hofmeyr, Moorthy and Jamal). Its distinct contribution lies in deploying memory and objects to mirror the ocean's fragmentary and fluid nature.

Ultimately, *The Gunny Sack* compels us to see the ocean as more than geography: it is a storyteller, an archive, and a witness to diasporic histories. In an era where oceans remain central to migration, ecological crisis, and cultural exchange, Vassanji's narrative remains profoundly relevant.

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