International Journal of Language, Literature and Culture (IJLLC)
ISSN: 2582-9823
Vol-5, Issue-5, Sep-Oct 2025
Journal DOI: 10.22161/ijllc
Article CrossRef DOI: https://dx.doi.org/10.22161/ijllc.5.5.5
Peer-Reviewed Journal

Memory, History, and Storytelling in M.G. Vassanji's *The Gunny Sack* and Abdulrazak Gurnah's *The Last Gift*

Khushboo Thakur

Research Scholar, Department of English, Shoolini University, Solan, H.P., India

Article Info

Received: 06 Aug 2025,

Received in revised form: 02 Sep 2025,

Accepted: 07 Sep 2025,

Available online: 13 Sep 2025

Keywords— memoir, creative writing, life events, childhood, family relationships

Abstract

This paper explores the role of memory, history, and storytelling in M.G. Vassanji's The Gunny Sack *(1989) and Abdulrazak Gurnah's* The Last Gift *(2011), examining how both authors employ narrative as a form of cultural archiving in postcolonial contexts. Vassanji's metaphor of the gunny sack functions as a material repository of memories, while Gurnah's portrayal of Abbas's dying confessions underscores the fragility of oral storytelling and the silences it carries. Through fragmented narratives, both writers reconstruct the erased or marginalized histories of displaced communities, emphasizing the interplay between silence, trauma, and intergenerational transmission of memory. Drawing on postcolonial memory studies, trauma theory, and narrative theory, this comparative analysis argues that storytelling in these novels not only resists colonial historiography but also acts as a means of healing, identity formation, and cultural continuity. Ultimately, the paper demonstrates how literature becomes an alternative archive, preserving voices and histories excluded from official records and highlighting the enduring significance of personal memory in shaping collective identity.*

I. INTRODUCTION

The themes of memory and storytelling hold a central place in postcolonial literature, where the act of narrating becomes a means of reclaiming suppressed or silenced histories. As Homi Bhabha argues, postcolonial narratives function within the "in-between" spaces of culture, recovering voices that colonial historiography often erased (2). In this context, memory does not merely serve as a personal recollection but emerges as a vital cultural and political tool, enabling communities to reconstruct fragmented pasts and assert collective identities in the aftermath of colonial disruption. Postcolonial writers often deploy storytelling as both a form of resistance and a strategy for cultural survival, transforming literature into what Paul Ricoeur calls a "refiguration of time" through narrative (21).

Within this framework, literature itself becomes an archive of silenced histories. Unlike official records that tend to privilege the colonizer's perspective, postcolonial fiction foregrounds marginalized voices, oral traditions,

and alternative modes of remembering. As Edward Said reminds us, the very experience of exile and displacement necessitates a counter-memory that challenges hegemonic histories and constructs new cultural imaginaries (135). Fiction, therefore, becomes an alternative historiography, where memory and storytelling offer a repository of communal experience, transcending the limitations of formal archives. This is particularly evident in diasporic literature, which reconstructs histories scattered across geographies and transmitted through fragmented memory.

The East African context exemplifies the urgency of such narrative practices. The region's history is deeply marked by colonial exploitation, the Indian Ocean slave trade, the migration of South Asian communities under British rule, and the subsequent dislocations during decolonization. As Thakur and Sahi note, "The sense of being permanently dislocated creates a profound existential wound" (The Struggle, 105). These experiences produced layered identities that were often silenced in national historiographies. As Pio Zirimu notes, the East African postcolonial experience is haunted by "cultural dislocation, multiple inheritances, and fractured memory" (89). Both M.G. Vassanji and Abdulrazak Gurnah situate their works within this historical backdrop, foregrounding the diasporic condition of East African Asians and Swahili Muslim communities, whose voices have long remained marginalized. Their novels use memory and storytelling to reconstruct these obscured pasts, thereby transforming literature into a living archive of trauma, nostalgia, and survival.

M.G. Vassanji, a Canadian writer of East African origin, has established himself as one of the foremost chroniclers of diasporic life and memory in the postcolonial Indian Ocean world. His debut novel, *The Gunny Sack*, is widely regarded as a foundational text in postcolonial diaspora literature. Through the metaphor of a sack filled with fragments of memory, Vassanji reimagines history as a collection of stories, artifacts, and silences passed across generations. The narrative is told by Salim Juma, who inherits the sack from his "aunt" Ji Bai, and in unpacking its contents, he reconstructs the history of his family and community scattered across colonial East Africa and South Asia. Critics such as Chelva Kanaganayakam emphasize that Vassanji's work is preoccupied with the tension between remembering and forgetting, where memory functions as both burden and inheritance (27). In *The Gunny Sack*, storytelling becomes a deliberate act of archiving, granting voice to communities marginalized by colonial records and nationalist histories alike.

Similarly, Abdulrazak Gurnah, the Tanzanian-born Nobel Laureate, has consistently explored the intersections of displacement, exile, and cultural memory in his fiction. His novel *The Last Gift* revolves around Abbas, a migrant patriarch living in England who, at the end of his life, begins to reveal fragments of his concealed past to his wife and children. The novel's fragmented structure mirrors the nature of memory itself—partial, elusive, and sometimes unreliable. For Gurnah, storytelling serves as a late-life confession but also as a mode of transmitting buried histories to the next generation. As Susheila Nasta observes, Gurnah's fiction often grapples with "the secrecy of exile and the difficulty of narrating traumatic histories" (104). In *The Last Gift*, the act of remembering becomes both cathartic and disruptive, confronting the silences of migration and colonial displacement while exposing the fragility of familial bonds built on secrecy.

Taken together, *The Gunny Sack* and *The Last Gift* reveal strikingly shared concerns. Both novels foreground the centrality of memory in reconstructing erased histories, whether through the symbolic archive of objects in Vassanji or the oral confessions of Gurnah's Abbas. Both texts situate the personal within broader historical trajectories of colonialism, migration, and diasporic unsettlement. They also highlight the profound sense of displacement that haunts postcolonial subjects, where identity is perpetually negotiated between loss and belonging. As Stephanie Newell argues, African diasporic writing often "records the absences of history while simultaneously seeking imaginative ways of re-membering" (63). In this sense, the works of Vassanji and Gurnah converge in their use of memory and storytelling as counter-archives that resist erasure, making literature a site of historical recovery, identity negotiation, and cultural survival.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study of memory within postcolonial literature emphasizes how individuals and communities reconstruct their pasts in the wake of displacement, colonial domination, and trauma. Jan Assmann defines cultural memory as a form of collective remembrance that extends beyond personal experience, transmitted across generations through texts, rituals, and symbols (110). This framework is especially relevant to diasporic narratives, where memory becomes the primary means of preserving identity and reconstructing obscured histories. Assmann further distinguishes between communicative memory, tied to lived generational experience, and cultural memory, which is institutionalized and mediated through cultural forms such as literature (126). Both concepts illuminate the ways in which Vassanji's *The Gunny Sack* and Gurnah's *The Last Gift* function as narrative archives that transform fragmented personal memory into enduring cultural records.

Equally central to this discussion is the link between trauma and silence. Cathy Caruth argues that trauma is characterized by a paradox of unspeakability, where the traumatic event is simultaneously remembered and repressed, "experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known" (4). This tension between remembering and silence resonates in Gurnah's *The Last Gift*, where Abbas's fragmented recollections reveal the burden of an unspoken past. Michelle Balaev, revising Caruth, emphasizes that trauma narratives are not only about belatedness and rupture but also about the reconstruction of identity through narrative re-articulation (7). Vassanji's *The Gunny Sack* similarly demonstrates how trauma is mediated through storytelling, where silences themselves become an integral part of the diasporic archive.

In addition, Homi Bhabha's concepts of the "unhomely" and hybridity are vital for understanding the diasporic condition. For Bhabha, the "unhomely" is the estranging sense of displacement in which private and public histories intermingle, producing fragmented subjectivities (13). Diasporic individuals live in this threshold space, neither fully at home in the homeland nor the hostland. Hybridity, meanwhile, signals the in-between cultural identities formed under colonial and postcolonial conditions, a constant negotiation between belonging and unbelonging. Both concepts shed light on how memory and storytelling in Vassanji and Gurnah operate within liminal spaces, reconstructing identity while acknowledging fragmentation.

If memory studies highlight the **content** of remembrance, narrative theory underscores the **form** by which memory is transmitted. Walter Benjamin, in his essay *The Storyteller*, argues that storytelling is a mode of preserving experience through oral tradition, where the act of narrating itself carries communal wisdom and continuity (87). This notion is particularly useful for analyzing *The Gunny Sack* and *The Last Gift*, where storytelling is not only a personal confession but also a collective act of archiving marginalized histories.

Paul Ricoeur expands this understanding by situating narrative as a means of refiguring time. In *Time and Narrative*, Ricoeur explains how narratives bind past, present, and future into a meaningful whole, transforming isolated memories into coherent histories (52). For diasporic writers like Vassanji and Gurnah, this process of emplotment allows fragmented memories—whether drawn from artifacts in a sack or deathbed confessions—to be woven into stories that bridge generational gaps.

Finally, storytelling in postcolonial literature functions as a form of counter-history, challenging dominant colonial archives and nationalist silences. As Edward Said asserts, the narratives of exile and displacement contest "official histories" by foregrounding the experiences of those rendered invisible (177). Storytelling thus operates as a resistant practice, one that reconstructs historical consciousness from below. Vassanji and Gurnah both transform literature into such a counter-archive, preserving voices excluded from the formal record and highlighting the role of memory as an alternative form of historical truth.

Memory and Storytelling in the *Gunny Sack*

At the heart of M.G. Vassanji's novel lies the **sack** itself, which functions as a central metaphor for the processes of memory, storytelling, and history. The sack, inherited by

Salim Juma from Ji Bai, contains fragments—letters, photographs, documents, and personal belongings—that symbolize the scattered and fragmented nature of diasporic history. As Chelva Kanaganayakam notes, the sack "embodies both the burden and the necessity of memory" since it preserves histories that would otherwise be lost to silence (43). The sack is not merely a material object; it becomes a repository of memory, carrying the weight of untold stories and silenced voices.

The contents of the sack also represent both material and oral artifacts of the past. Each object retrieved from the sack prompts a narrative recollection, transforming personal belongings into cultural signifiers. For example, the yellowed letters and faded photographs act as mnemonic triggers that enable Salim to reconstruct his community's past. This interplay between material culture and oral narration illustrates what Jan Assmann calls the dual function of memory as both "storage" and "communication" (126). In this sense, the sack is more than an archive—it is an interactive site where memory is activated through storytelling.

Vassanji employs fragmented narration to mirror the disrupted and incomplete nature of colonial and diasporic histories. The narrative does not unfold in linear chronology but shifts between past and present, between East Africa and South Asia, producing a sense of dislocation that reflects the lived reality of his characters. This fragmentation resonates with Cathy Caruth's assertion that trauma is experienced as a disruption in temporality, where the past "returns belatedly and incompletely" (6). The structure of *The Gunny Sack* thus mimics the way diasporic communities remember—through fragments, ruptures, and gaps.

Another key strategy is intergenerational storytelling. The sack is passed down as a legacy, and with it comes the responsibility of narration. Ji Bai's act of handing over the sack to Salim symbolizes the transmission of memory from one generation to another, ensuring continuity despite displacement. As Stephanie Newell observes, African diasporic fiction frequently uses generational transmission to "re-member" fragmented histories, bridging the silences of colonialism with personal testimony (78). Vassanji situates Salim as both recipient and narrator, highlighting the responsibility of diasporic subjects to preserve and retell communal histories. Thakur and Sahi opine that, "The stories contained in the gunny sack do not offer closure or coherence but instead reveal the complexity of diasporic heritage" (Exile, 111)

One of the novel's major themes is the migration of Asian-African communities, particularly those who arrived in East Africa as traders, laborers, and clerks under colonial structures. The gunny sack becomes a metaphorical vessel of this migration, containing stories of movement across the Indian Ocean. Vassanji situates these migrations within broader colonial and global networks, showing how communities were uprooted and resettled in foreign landscapes. As Brinda Mehta argues, the novel "retrieves the hybrid Indian Ocean histories" that have often been ignored by dominant narratives of Africa and Asia (52).

The novel also foregrounds the **silenced** histories of East African Asians under colonialism. Their contributions and struggles were often marginalized within both colonial and nationalist historiographies. The stories retrieved from the sack highlight lives lived in the shadow of empire, where identities were simultaneously privileged as intermediaries of colonial power and marginalized as outsiders within African nationalism. Gaurav Desai emphasizes that Vassanji's narrative reveals the "ambivalent positionality" of the Asian community in East Africa, caught between inclusion and exclusion (101). The sack's archive becomes a counter-narrative that reclaims these overlooked histories.

Finally, the novel addresses the profound themes of nostalgia and trauma. The act of opening the sack inevitably recalls both cherished and painful memories, producing an ambivalent sense of longing. For Salim and his community, nostalgia is directed toward a past that is both irretrievable and fractured. As Marianne Hirsch explains in her theory of "postmemory," the transmission of trauma across generations often results in a nostalgic but fragmented reimagining of the past (107). Vassanji captures this dynamic, where nostalgia becomes entangled with trauma, highlighting the diasporic condition

of being perpetually suspended between memory and loss.

Memory and Storytelling in *The Last Gift*

Abdulrazak Gurnah's *The Last Gift* situates memory at the center of its narrative, embodied in the figure of Abbas, an aging patriarch whose declining health compels him to confront the silences of his past. Abbas's memories emerge in fragments rather than in a coherent life story, signaling both the difficulty of recollection and the burden of traumatic remembrance. His gradual confessions reflect a form of oral storytelling, marked by hesitation, incompleteness, and the constant interplay of revelation and concealment. In this sense, Abbas embodies the fragility of memory as both a personal archive and a site of collective history (45).

Abbas's narrative functions not simply as autobiography but as an attempt to restore the fractured links between his hidden past and his present family life. The secrecy surrounding his origins and his migration history reflects a broader tendency among diasporic subjects to suppress painful memories of displacement, violence, and estrangement. Gurnah suggests that silence itself is a mode of survival, but one that simultaneously estranges Abbas from his children and wife, who remain ignorant of his earlier life in East Africa (Steiner 92). This act of withholding produces intergenerational dissonance, underscoring how trauma often manifests through gaps, silences, and delayed disclosure rather than direct narration (Caruth 4).

The unraveling of Abbas's past becomes a central narrative device through which Gurnah engages with memory as both an intimate family matter and a larger postcolonial condition. The novel demonstrates how diasporic families often inherit not only stories but also silences, as the younger generations grapple with the unspoken histories of migration, colonial entanglements, and cultural displacement. Abbas's revelations to his wife Maryam and children, Jamal and Hanna, destabilize the family's sense of identity, forcing them to renegotiate their own place within a narrative that had previously been suppressed (Gurnah 103).

Through Abbas's storytelling, Gurnah illustrates the entanglement of personal and collective memory in the diasporic condition. The novel dramatizes how individual histories—shaped by migration, colonial violence, and exile—cannot be divorced from broader cultural and historical processes (Visser 23). Abbas's silence about his past is not merely personal reticence but is tied to the wider silencing of East African histories within colonial and postcolonial narratives. By situating Abbas's fragmented memories within the structure of a family saga, Gurnah transforms storytelling into a counter-historical practice, one that restores erased voices and challenges dominant accounts of migration and belonging (Steiner 101).

In this way, *The Last Gift* emphasizes that memory in diasporic contexts is always mediated by silence, loss, and belated articulation. Abbas's final act of storytelling—his "last gift" to his family—is not simply the disclosure of truth but the recognition that memory itself is fragile, partial, and deeply entangled with the histories of displacement that define the postcolonial subject. It reflects how displacement leads to "a lifelong loss of identity and belongingness" (Sahi 102)

One of the central narrative techniques in both M.G. Vassanji's *The Gunny Sack* and Abdulrazak Gurnah's *The Last Gift* is the constant oscillation between past and present. This narrative movement mirrors the structure of diasporic memory itself, where recollection does not unfold in linear progression but in fragments, triggered by objects, silences, or sudden disclosures. In *The Gunny Sack*, the narrator Salim engages with the past through the material metaphor of the sack, which acts as a mnemonic device, compelling him to revisit stories of ancestors and migrations across generations (Vassanji 14). Similarly, in *The Last Gift*, Abbas's memories resurface in the midst of his illness, disrupting the family's present and forcing the past into dialogue with the now (Gurnah 76).

This shifting temporal structure creates a layered narrative that destabilizes conventional historiography. Rather than offering a single, authoritative account, both novels foreground memory as an unstable but crucial form of

historical reconstruction. Such narrative fragmentation reflects Homi Bhabha's concept of the "unhomely," in which past and present collapse into each other, producing an uncanny sense of displacement that is intrinsic to postcolonial identity (13). By refusing a neat chronology, the novels convey how the histories of migration, colonialism, and exile resist closure, remaining unfinished and constantly re-emerging within the present moment.

While memory serves as the primary mode of narration in both texts, it is also portrayed as unreliable, marked by silence, distortion, and selective recall. In *The Gunny Sack*, Salim acknowledges the difficulty of recovering the "truth" about his ancestors, noting how stories are fragmented, embellished, or silenced across generations (Vassanji 112). The sack's contents themselves—letters, artifacts, and oral tales—do not provide a complete picture but instead invite interpretation, underscoring the constructed nature of memory. Likewise, in *The Last Gift*, Abbas's storytelling is riddled with omissions and belated confessions, revealing how trauma often resists full articulation. His silences are as telling as his words, reflecting Cathy Caruth's notion that trauma returns belatedly, in fragments, and cannot always be narrated directly (4).

Yet, despite its unreliability, memory remains necessary for reconstructing identity and reclaiming suppressed histories. As Aleida Assmann argues, cultural memory operates not as a perfect archive but as a dynamic process of remembering and forgetting that allows communities to make sense of their past (41). In both Vassanji and Gurnah, memory—whether embodied in a gunny sack or a dying patriarch's voice—becomes a vital means of counter-history, challenging official colonial records that erase or marginalize Asian-African presences in East Africa. The narrative strategies of fragmentation, repetition, and silence thus demonstrate how storytelling itself becomes an act of resistance and survival.

In *The Last Gift*, silence is both a strategy of survival and a haunting presence. Abbas, the patriarch, carries with him the weight of a past shaped by displacement and migration. For much of his life, he chooses silence as a means of coping with the trauma of leaving Zanzibar and the secrets of his past. His reluctance to share his story with his family is bound up in guilt—guilt over his fragmented identity, over the compromises made during migration, and over the losses that his silence perpetuates. The secrecy around his personal history symbolizes the broader silences of postcolonial subjects whose experiences remain absent from official histories. As Gurnah illustrates, Abbas's silence ultimately erodes his relationship with his children, who remain alienated from their own cultural past (115). Silence here is not neutral; it is a manifestation of trauma and unprocessed memory, reflecting Cathy Caruth's idea that trauma is often transmitted through its very inexpressibility (4).

The novel suggests that storytelling, even when fragmented and belated, has the power to reconcile estranged identities and heal fractured familial bonds. Abbas's late confessions, although incomplete, provide a tentative bridge between him and his children. His storytelling, shaped by the constraints of memory and time, functions as a last attempt at leaving behind a legacy that connects personal history with collective cultural memory. Storytelling becomes what Walter Benjamin describes as an act of transmitting lived experience in a way that resists erasure (87). By narrating his past, Abbas contributes to the family's understanding of their diasporic roots, transforming silence into narrative and guilt into a form of continuity. Although reconciliation is partial—since memory remains selective and fragmented—it nonetheless offers a redemptive possibility for both Abbas and his children (Visser 68).

The weight of Abbas's silence is most acutely felt by the second generation, his children, Jamal and Hanna. Deprived of a clear narrative about their origins, they struggle with a sense of dislocation and incompleteness in their own identities. This reflects Marianne Hirsch's concept of *postmemory*, where children of displaced individuals inherit the emotional and psychological burden of histories they did not directly experience (22). Jamal and Hanna's frustration with their father's secrecy highlights the generational impact of silenced trauma: the younger generation is left to grapple with

fragmented cultural memory, negotiating between belonging in Britain and the invisible legacy of their father's unspoken past (Steiner 309). The unarticulated history becomes a form of inheritance, shaping their identities through absence as much as through presence. Gurnah underscores the paradox that while silence shields the patriarch from reliving trauma, it simultaneously denies his children the chance to fully understand and integrate their heritage.

III. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Both *The Gunny Sack* and *The Last Gift* treat memory as a fragile, incomplete, and often unreliable repository of the past, yet one that remains indispensable for shaping identity. Memory in these novels does not function as a neat chronological record but as a fractured mosaic—intermittent, selective, and burdened by silences. Despite its fragmentariness, memory emerges as the only way for diasporic communities to connect with their histories of displacement, migration, and exile. As Paul Ricoeur observes, memory acts as both a trace and a reconstruction, preserving fragments of the past even as it reshapes them in the present (21). In this sense, memory in both Vassanji and Gurnah becomes the primary means of sustaining cultural identity across generations.

In *The Gunny Sack*, Vassanji literalizes memory through the symbolic object of the gunny sack itself, filled with fragments, documents, and artifacts from the past. These objects act as what Pierre Nora calls *lieux de mémoire*—sites of memory that preserve traces of a vanished world (7). Salim, the narrator, inherits the sack from his great-aunt Ji Bai, and as he sorts through its contents, he reconstructs the diasporic history of his Indian family in East Africa. The material archive—letters, trinkets, and mementos—becomes a tangible embodiment of cultural memory. Yet this archive is not complete; many items are ambiguous or meaningless without accompanying stories. The act of reconstructing history from these fragments underscores the instability of memory, but also its role in forming a collective diasporic identity (Vassanji 34). In effect, the gunny sack embodies what Aleida Assmann terms *cultural memory*, where objects serve as material anchors for otherwise ephemeral personal and collective narratives (132).

By contrast, in *The Last Gift*, Gurnah emphasizes memory as a form of oral storytelling and confession. Abbas, the dying patriarch, becomes the repository of unspoken histories, but his memories are fragmented, belated, and hesitant. His confessions to his children are not structured narratives but fractured recollections, shaped by silences, guilt, and trauma. Unlike Vassanji's material archive, Abbas's oral archive is ephemeral, threatened by forgetfulness and the limitations of speech. Yet it is through these hesitant oral disclosures that his children begin to piece together their own identity and heritage (Gurnah 142). Oral memory here aligns with Jan Assmann's concept of *communicative memory*, where storytelling transmits personal and generational experiences that are otherwise excluded from official history (127). The spoken word—partial, subjective, unreliable—becomes a vital bridge across generational and cultural divides.

The key contrast between the two novels lies in their strategies of preserving diasporic memory. Vassanji situates memory in objects, underscoring how material artifacts can preserve traces of the past, even if their meanings are unstable or forgotten. The gunny sack, as a physical archive, resists erasure and serves as a durable, if enigmatic, vessel of cultural memory. Gurnah, in contrast, foregrounds the ephemerality of oral confession. Abbas's memories, unlike objects, cannot be preserved once he dies; they require transmission to the next generation through the fragile medium of storytelling. Together, these texts illustrate the double bind of diasporic memory: its dependence on material traces on the one hand, and narrative transmission on the other. Both forms are partial, yet both are essential in maintaining continuity within displaced communities.

In both *The Gunny Sack* and *The Last Gift*, storytelling emerges as a profound act of resistance against dominant colonial historiographies that systematically erased or marginalized the lived experiences of East African communities. While colonial records emphasized trade, governance, and imperial expansion, they often silenced the personal,

emotional, and communal dimensions of colonial encounter. Vassanji and Gurnah challenge these absences by positioning storytelling as a means of reconstituting identity and reclaiming suppressed histories.

In Vassanji's *The Gunny Sack*, the narrator, Salim, uses the objects contained in the sack as prompts to narrate the stories of his ancestors—tales that the colonial archive neglects. Each artifact becomes a symbol of survival, migration, and cultural adaptation, transforming storytelling into a counter-narrative that resists the erasure of Asian-African histories. By embedding fragmented and intergenerational stories into the novel's structure, Vassanji demonstrates how memory and narrative can subvert the linearity and authority of colonial history (Ratti 112). This form of storytelling does not merely record history; it contests official narratives and provides space for marginalized voices to speak.

Similarly, Gurnah's *The Last Gift* turns to oral storytelling, where Abbas's deathbed confessions disrupt the silence he has maintained throughout his life. His narratives, though fragmented and incomplete, function as acts of resistance by acknowledging experiences of displacement, guilt, and colonial violence that had previously been repressed. Abbas's refusal to leave his life unspoken illustrates how storytelling can become a final assertion of agency against the silencing structures of colonialism and migration. As A. Roche notes, Gurnah "positions storytelling not only as personal revelation but as an intervention in the politics of memory" (56). In this sense, Abbas's oral confessions become counter-histories that rival the official accounts which exclude the emotional realities of migration and exile.

For both writers, storytelling is not only about preserving memory but also about survival and cultural continuity. In diasporic contexts, where displacement often leads to cultural fragmentation, stories preserve connections across time and space. They serve as what Homi Bhabha calls the "unhomely," where private memory intersects with public history in ways that destabilize dominant narratives (13). Storytelling thus becomes a survival strategy, a means of transmitting identity and cultural belonging to future generations, and a way of ensuring that colonial silences are not perpetuated in the postcolonial present.

In essence, Vassanji and Gurnah demonstrate that storytelling functions as both an archive and a weapon—archiving suppressed histories while resisting the epistemic violence of colonialism. Their novels illustrate that while official histories may impose silence, personal and communal narratives endure as acts of defiance, survival, and cultural preservation.

Both M.G. Vassanji's *The Gunny Sack* and Abdulrazak Gurnah's *The Last Gift* grapple with the tension between history and silence, but they dramatize it through different narrative strategies and metaphors.

In *The Gunny Sack*, silence manifests as gaps within the material archive. The sack itself, filled with objects, letters, and fragments of the past, is both a repository and a reminder of what remains untold. Salim, the narrator, sifts through its contents to reconstruct the silenced histories of East African Asians, yet the fragmented nature of the artifacts testifies to the incompleteness of memory. Vassanji portrays silence as an imposed condition of colonial history: the voices of migrants, women, and those who lived at the margins were systematically muted. Thus, the sack becomes a symbol of what Marianne Hirsch calls *postmemory*—the attempt of later generations to access histories that were never fully transmitted (22). Here, silence is structural, embedded in the very process of archiving and remembering.

By contrast, in *The Last Gift*, silence is embodied in Abbas's withholding of his life story. Whereas *The Gunny Sack* materializes silence through objects, *The Last Gift* dramatizes silence as psychological repression and interpersonal distance. Abbas's silence is not the result of colonial erasure but of personal guilt, trauma, and the difficulty of articulating displacement. His family becomes the audience deprived of an inheritance that could anchor their sense of belonging. Only in his dying days, through fragmented oral confessions, does Abbas attempt to bridge this gap. As Cathy Caruth explains, trauma often returns belatedly, "in the attempt to tell what one cannot fully know" (7). Abbas's fragmented speech reflects this belatedness,

where silence is gradually unraveled in the face of mortality.

Despite these differences, both novels reveal silence as a double-edged condition: it is protective, shielding individuals from the unbearable weight of trauma, yet also destructive, severing generational connections. In *The Gunny Sack*, the silence of colonial records necessitates an alternative archive of memory; in *The Last Gift*, Abbas's silence necessitates oral storytelling as an act of reconciliation. Together, the novels illustrate that silence is not simply absence but an active force in shaping diasporic identity—whether through what is left unarchived or what remains unspoken within families.

Thus, silence in both texts functions as a narrative and thematic hinge. Vassanji exposes the systemic silencing of marginalized histories under colonialism, while Gurnah explores the intimate silences of migration, guilt, and secrecy. In both cases, the eventual breaking of silence—through storytelling, objects, or oral confession—becomes essential for cultural survival and intergenerational continuity.

Both *The Gunny Sack* and *The Last Gift* foreground the question of how memory is transmitted across generations, and how this transmission becomes central to the preservation of diasporic identity. The novels suggest that memory is not merely an individual possession but a collective inheritance, passed on through artifacts, stories, and silences.

In *The Gunny Sack*, Vassanji dramatizes intergenerational memory through the metaphor of the sack itself. Salim inherits this physical repository from his great-uncle Rajan, which contains objects, letters, and fragments of a shared past. Each artifact is a trigger for narration, linking Salim's generation to those who came before him. The sack thus becomes both an archive and a burden, reflecting the responsibility placed on the younger generation to "carry forward" histories that might otherwise disappear. Marianne Hirsch's concept of *postmemory* is especially relevant here, as Salim reconstructs a past he never directly experienced, but one that defines his cultural and diasporic identity (5). Through this process, Vassanji highlights that the survival of marginalized histories—particularly those of East African Asians under colonialism—depends upon the willingness of younger generations to engage with inherited fragments of memory.

By contrast, in *The Last Gift*, intergenerational memory emerges not through objects but through oral storytelling and withheld confessions. Abbas's silence throughout most of his life leaves his children, Jamal and Hanna, disconnected from their cultural roots. His eventual deathbed storytelling functions as a delayed act of transmission, where fragments of his buried past are passed on to his family. Unlike Salim, who actively excavates memory from the sack, Jamal and Hanna are passive recipients of memory, dependent on their father's willingness to disclose his secrets. This dynamic illustrates the vulnerability of memory transmission: when silence dominates, entire generations risk growing up without a sense of history or belonging. Cathy Caruth reminds us that trauma disrupts linear inheritance, as stories are often transmitted belatedly, incompletely, or in fragmented form (7). Gurnah's narrative reflects this belatedness—memory becomes a last gift to the next generation, both fragile and indispensable.

Despite their different modes of inheritance, both novels emphasize that the younger generation carries the responsibility of safeguarding and reinterpreting the past. Salim, as custodian of the gunny sack, assumes the role of archivist and storyteller, ensuring that his community's suppressed histories are not forgotten. Similarly, Jamal and Hanna must grapple with the incomplete fragments of Abbas's past, piecing together their identities through the gaps he left behind. In both cases, intergenerational memory is an ethical duty as much as a narrative strategy—it ensures continuity amidst displacement and cultural erasure.

Thus, *The Gunny Sack* and *The Last Gift* converge on the idea that memory transmission is central to diasporic survival. Whether through material artifacts or oral confession, the younger generation becomes the bearer of stories, charged with the task of keeping alive histories that might otherwise remain silenced or forgotten.

IV. CONCLUSION

The comparative study of M.G. Vassanji's *The Gunny Sack* and Abdulrazak Gurnah's *The Last Gift* demonstrates how both authors employ narrative strategies to archive fragmented, suppressed, and silenced histories of diasporic communities. Through different symbolic devices—Vassanji's material repository in the form of the sack and Gurnah's oral confessions of a dying patriarch—the novels converge on the same essential function: the act of storytelling as a means of survival, remembrance, and identity-making.

Both texts insist that memory is never whole or seamless; rather, it exists in fragments, silences, and interruptions. In *The Gunny Sack*, the material archive preserves the scattered remnants of the past, while in *The Last Gift*, Abbas's late revelations embody memory's fragility and belatedness. Together, they foreground the diasporic condition where histories are always at risk of erasure, yet simultaneously reclaimed through acts of narration.

A central insight emerging from this comparison is the dual nature of memory—as both burden and gift. For the younger generations in these novels, memory often feels like an overwhelming responsibility, demanding them to inherit traumas, silences, and cultural dislocations not of their own making. Salim's role as the custodian of the sack and Jamal and Hanna's reluctant receivership of their father's fragmented past exemplify this burden. Yet, these inheritances are also gifts, providing continuity, belonging, and a sense of cultural rootedness amidst displacement. Memory, though fractured, ensures that erased or silenced histories remain alive in narrative form.

Ultimately, Vassanji and Gurnah highlight the ethical importance of storytelling in diasporic contexts. Their novels counter colonial erasures by inscribing alternative archives, centering voices, objects, and memories otherwise excluded from dominant historical accounts. Storytelling, therefore, functions not only as a narrative strategy but also as resistance, reconciliation, and cultural preservation. In making memory central to their works, both writers remind us that the survival of diasporic identity depends on the ongoing negotiation of memory—between silence and speech, trauma and healing, burden and gift.

The comparative reading of Vassanji's *The Gunny Sack* and Gurnah's *The Last Gift* not only sheds light on the specific histories of Asian and African diasporic communities in East Africa but also opens a wider theoretical conversation about literature's role as an alternative archive in postcolonial studies. Both texts resist the silences and omissions of colonial historiography by preserving suppressed experiences through narrative. While official archives often erase the lived realities of marginal communities, literature offers a space where memory, trauma, and displacement can be articulated, preserved, and transmitted. In this sense, fiction functions as a counter-archive—an imaginative yet historically grounded repository of experiences that might otherwise vanish (Assmann 127; Benjamin 87).

Storytelling in these novels extends beyond an act of remembering; it becomes a process of healing and identity formation. For diasporic subjects, who often exist in states of rupture and unhomeliness, stories offer continuity across generations. Salim's guardianship of the sack and Abbas's confessional narrative reveal how personal memories are transformed into communal inheritances, shaping the identities of those who come after. In the process, storytelling not only preserves history but also fosters reconciliation with the past, making it possible for communities to negotiate belonging in the present. This highlights the therapeutic potential of narrative in trauma studies, where memory's articulation enables the possibility of recovery and self-understanding (Caruth 153; Balaev 363).

On a larger scale, the novels invite scholars and readers to reconsider the value of narrative as a cultural resource that complements and critiques historical discourse. They remind us that literature is not merely aesthetic but deeply political and ethical—capable of carrying silenced voices into visibility. Through the interplay of memory, silence, and storytelling, Vassanji and Gurnah demonstrate that the work of fiction is essential for reimagining fragmented histories and for sustaining diasporic identity

across time. In doing so, they contribute significantly to ongoing debates in postcolonial, memory, and trauma studies, affirming storytelling as both resistance and survival.

While the comparative reading of *The Gunny Sack* and *The Last Gift* reveals how Vassanji and Gurnah use memory and storytelling to address histories of displacement, there remain important avenues for future scholarship. One promising direction lies in the broader study of **memory and migration in other postcolonial diasporic writers**. Authors such as Salman Rushdie, Jhumpa Lahiri, and Amitav Ghosh, alongside African writers like Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and Tsitsi Dangarembga, also engage with the complexities of diasporic identity, trauma, and cultural inheritance. Their works expand the conversation by exploring different geographies and historical legacies, from the South Asian diaspora in Britain to the forced migrations caused by slavery and apartheid. Comparative readings could illuminate both the commonalities and divergences in how memory is represented across varied diasporic contexts (Said 173; Gilroy 19).

Another productive path for research lies in **comparative studies across Indian Ocean literature**. The Indian Ocean, long a site of trade, migration, and cultural exchange, offers a unique framework for understanding the histories of displacement, hybridity, and identity that Vassanji and Gurnah narrate. Scholars such as Isabel Hofmeyr and Sugata Bose have emphasized how the Indian Ocean world resists neat national or continental boundaries, foregrounding instead the fluid networks of cultural memory and historical interaction. A comparative study of Indian Ocean texts—including novels by Abdulrazak Gurnah, M.G. Vassanji, Lindsey Collen, and Abdul Sheriff—would deepen insights into how memory is shaped by maritime histories of indenture, slavery, and colonial encounters. Such research would not only expand postcolonial literary studies but also contribute to the growing interdisciplinary field of Indian Ocean studies, where history, anthropology, and literature intersect (Hofmeyr 6; Bose 43).

In both these trajectories, future research can build on the insights of Vassanji and Gurnah by situating their works within broader diasporic and transoceanic traditions. Doing so will allow scholars to better understand how memory, migration, and storytelling function as interconnected strategies for reclaiming silenced histories and reimagining postcolonial identities.

In conclusion, the comparative exploration of M.G. Vassanji's *The Gunny Sack* and Abdulrazak Gurnah's *The Last Gift* demonstrates how memory and storytelling serve as vital tools for reconstructing fragmented histories of migration, trauma, and displacement. Both authors reveal that memory—whether preserved through material archives or oral confession—is at once a burden and a gift, shaping identities across generations. Beyond their individual contributions, the novels highlight the power of literature to act as an alternative archive, one that challenges official histories, preserves silenced voices, and enables healing through narrative. As future research extends these insights across diasporic and Indian Ocean literatures, it becomes clear that storytelling is not only a mode of resistance but also a living bridge between past and present, ensuring continuity, belonging, and identity formation for displaced communities.

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