Chapter II

Recycling Anecdotes: Reconstructing Evolutionary History

The short, agnostic accounts of particular events, factual or imaginary are usually referred to as anecdotes and these have been around from time immemorial. However, the term 'anecdote' as diagnostic device is fairly new in the scenario of literary theories. Anecdotes have always appeared in a close relationship with the longer, more convoluted narratives of history, sometimes in a supportive role, as examples and illustrations, sometimes in a challenging role. The role of anecdotes in either supporting or contradicting history depends on the historian and the usage. There are anecdotes which are well-structured, universally accepted and which crystallise historical themes and ideas. There are some anecdotes which are loosely-structured, unpopular among people and yield deplorable and marginalised historical facts.

Joel Fineman unfolds the evolution and operation of anecdote in his article "History of Anecdote" which appeared in *New Historicism* edited by Aram Veeser. He measures the significance of anecdote in the study of historiography. Fineman believes in the role of anecdote in interpreting history for he remarks, that ". . . the anecdote determines the destiny of a specifically historiographic integration of event and context" (56). He attributes two features to an anecdote:

> These two features, therefore, taken together—i.e., first, that the anecdote has something literary about it, but, second, that the anecdote, however literary, is nevertheless directly pointed towards or rooted in the real— allow us to think of the anecdote, given its formal if not its actual brevity, as a historeme, i.e., as the smallest minimal unit of the historiographic fact. (56-57)

Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt consider anecdote as a signature motif of new historicism. New historical readings embark on anecdotes which eventually unfold historical circumstances. Anecdotes furnish representational plenitudes. Anecdotes are small events, historeme and form the smallest unit of historiography. The role of anecdote is literary, referential and recreating the history. The arbitrarily seeming anecdotes convey very impressive ideas and deep meanings. It is an attempt to conjure complex ideas with tiny fragments. A well-pitched anecdote delineates a slice of life.

Accordingly, as per new historicism, history becomes synchronic and events are conjured in their contexts disregarding either the time preceding it or the time succeeding it. Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt discuss the importance of anecdote in the context of the new historical reading and substantiate it in *Practicing New Historicism*:

> The anecdotes would open history, or place it askew, so that literary texts could find new points of insertion. Perhaps texts would even shed their singular categorical identities, their division into 'literary' and 'historical'; at the very least, 'history' could be imagined as part of their contingency, a component of their time-bound materiality, an element of their unpredictability. Approached sideways, through the eccentric anecdote, 'history' would cease to be a way of stabilizing texts; it would instead become part of their enigmatic being. (51)

Greenblatt says he seeks the 'touch of the real' in the anecdote for an ethnographic detection and defining real. However, he intends the literary and the non-literary text to serve as each other's thick description. Greenblatt observes that an anecdote is the expression of desire beyond the literary boundary into day-to-day life and wide cultural practices. For his elucidation, he relies on the historian Auerbach and the anthropologist Clifford Geertz. He draws examples

from Auerbach, pointing to the echoes between a typical Auerbachian opening in Mimesis and his own new historicist anecdotes. He suggests that anecdotes used by the new historicists as a mechanism is an Auerbachian device. He explains that in Auerbach's hand, a fragment of text or an anecdote resonate the work from which it is extracted and the culture which has produced the text.

Catherine Gallagher renders a comprehensive account of this imperative device in her exemplified consideration on the anecdote. For Gallagher, the anecdote is not a synecdoche. However, it is a kind of counter history, a term she derives from the tradition of rabbinical polemics against the Gospels. Gallagher analyses other cultural historians and discusses their standpoints. She includes Raymond Williams who treats literature itself as a kind of counter history which can give access to non-discursive as well as discursive forms of consciousness. Eventually, conflated perspectives and ideas bring in historical revelations.

All cultures effect erasures and revisions of their past, in a literal or figurative sense. Anecdote performs an act of historical recovery and demystification, bringing something invisible in plain language into sudden focus, into significance and into history. Greenblatt believes, "The anecdote thereby exposes history" (50). An anecdote can be perceived as a trace of the 'real.'

History can be interpreted as an exfoliation out of and meditation on all the aspects of the anecdote. It suggests juxtaposition between history and representation; event and its interpretation; the actual and its ideological construction; reconstruction and demystification. It is supposedly an affirmative socio-cultural hermeneutics. The myth that underlines anecdotal work is that an anecdote almost chosen at random can stand for an entire age or culture.

Anecdotes protruding from the fictional framework of M. G. Vassanji's novels render a prospect of exploring the cultural extraction deposited in them. As anecdotes can be either factual or fictional, numerous anecdotes can be mustered from Vassanji's fictional microcosm. These anecdotes, serving as lens into the lives of some individuals, eventually interweave the profile of a socio-cultural community in general and the origin of Khoja community in particular. An intense perusal of these anecdotes and the context of their origin will probably determine the evolution of this ethnic group.

The Shamsi community delineated on the fictional canvas of Vassanji renders a kaleidoscopic perspective of early Sufism, Mysticism and the religious conversion in India; immigrant experience, European colonial rule of Africa; the dynamism of contemporary acculturation and Westernisation in America and Canada. This is supplemented by an overall impression of the Khoja community.

The legendary tale of Nur Fazal running parallel to the Karsan's life in M. G. Vassanji's *The Assassin's Song* can be carved apart as an anecdote. The mythological tale looming in the background of the main plot narrates the tale of a Sufi saint Nur Fazal who arrived in Vishal Dev's kingdom, Paton. It gives a microscopic representation of the spiritual expeditions of the Sufi saints from far West in search of deliverance and harmony. The spiritual explorations of Sufi faith and the underpinning for a new religious insignia are corroborated. The anecdote unfolds:

> Overlooking everything here, towards the farther side of the compound was the grand mausoleum of a thirteenth-century mystic, a sufi called Nur Fazal, known to us belovedly as Pir Bawa and to the world around us as Mussafar Shah, the Wanderer. One day, centuries ago, he came wandering into our land, Gujarat, like

> a meteor from beyond, and settled here. He became our guide and guru, he showed us the path to liberation from the bonds of temporal existence. Little was known and few really cared about his historical identity: where exactly he came from, who he was, the name of his people. His mother tongue was Persian, perhaps, but he gave us his teachings in the form of songs he composed in our own language, Gujarati. (TAS 3)

The advent of foreigners as pilgrims and explorers is one of the major factors contributing to the origin of many religions in India. The new comer might have been a political enemy, a religious radical, an outcaste or an adventurer exploring the cultural and religious novelty. There were many Pirs and saints who arrived as scholars, preachers and as pilgrims in the sixth and seventh century BC. It is a well-observed premise that after gratifying the rulers of Indian kingdoms, they succeeded in procuring a regal position. Whatsoever, the reason for the arrival of Nur Fazal to Gujarat might be, he represents a stereotypical Sufi transgressing the religious and cultural frontiers.

The Indian rulers are illustrious for their religious conservatism and their allegiance to spiritual supervision. The Purohit appointed as a religious adviser in the court of the Indian king performed all religious rites and manoeuvred the decisions made by the monarch. Religious disparity claimed prime order closely followed by religious ideologies. Nur Fazal, being a non-Hindu is conceived as impure and undeserving:

> There was a buzz of excited chatter and polite laughter among them, as though a contest in gymnastics or wrestling were about to take place; a drink of cold green sherbet was proffered to the king and his advisers, then to the others. The king put a betel leaf into his red mouth to chew. The sufi too was proffered the sweet

> drink, but in a crude earthenware glass, which he knew would be destroyed, having touched the lips of an impure one, as he was considered in this country. He refused the betel leaf, finding the practice—which stained the mouth and lips red—repulsive , even though his unstained mouth was considered a sign of the vulgar and foreign. (TAS 11)

All religions retrace their inceptions in mythologies, miraculous tales and parables. Vassanji appends miracles to the legendary narration of Nur Fazal as well. The Sufi who is despised for his intrusion in Paton, is eventually accepted as a spiritual guide. He is challenged by the court religious scholar to prove his spiritual expertise and all are called forth to exhibit their skills. Nur Fazal performs miracles which surpass the feat of others and corroborate his lustre. One such miracle is performed by him when a group of pilgrims comes to his aid:

> 'At this spot under a neem-no, not this one, forgive me, but its predecessor —sat a group of Lohana farmers from Jamnagar who were on their way to Kashi for pilgrimage and had stopped to rest. Pir Bawa—Mussafar Shah— he has many names, as you know—made them welcome. They were given food. He noticed that they were very tired, and an old woman among them was about to die. Pir Bawa thereupon asked them where they were headed with a dying woman. They gave him their answer, and Pir Bawa replied, 'Do you think this sick woman will make it all the way to Kashi?' 'No, Guru-ji,' they replied. 'We might have to take her ashes only.' And Pir Bawa said, 'I will take all of you to Kashi myself.' And he did, right there. They gathered around him and closed their eyes as bid, and next they were in the holy city, beside the holy river. They bathed in the Ganga, paid their respects at the temples, and when they opened their eyes they were back at

> Pirbaag. Right here. The halwa they had received from the temples was beside them. And Pir Bawa himself was sitting in their midst. The pilgrims fell at his feet. 'Show us your path, Guru-ji, you are truly the saviour,' they said.' (TAS 42)

This anecdote of the arrival of a Pir Bawa from the lands unknown to India, amongst the simpletons is embedded in Vassanji's *The Gunny Sack*. The underlying idea of the anecdote is similar, however, the Sufi saint is different one. The narrative whirls around Pir Shama, who came from somewhere else beyond the Indian perimeters. His religious approach silhouetted against performance of dance and music appealed to simple-minded people. These admirers of Pir Shama's ways of worship eventually became his followers and converted to the mystifying faith which is quoted extensively here:

> One quiet night they sat outside their doorways in little groups, gurgling hookahs and talking in murmurs. The babies were sleeping and the women were inside with them. From somewhere there rang out an occasional sound from the older children playing. The night was starry, and a cool wind rustled the leaves of the mango and almond trees. Around them the crickets chirped. Moths and other insects weaved dances around the solitary lamp hanging from a tree. A tall, bearded man came in sight, in a long white robe and a white skull cap. Pausing in the distance, his long wide shadow merging with the darkness of the trees and forest, he began clapping his hands in rhythm and dancing the rasa. He went one full circle, singing of hope. They listened. Then like a ghost he disappeared, as he had come. The next night again he came and did one full circle of the rasa; and sang. The sound was sweet, the message enticing with promise and hope. Slowly they got up, one by one, from where they were watching and started walking

> towards him. They formed a circle around him. Then, clapping hands and clicking fingers, together they danced the garba, a circle of singing men in motion around the white figure. A little later the women came out from the huts and joined them. Then came the older children from where they were playing. The whole village danced the garba and sang. Then the man initiated them into the secret. He taught them new prayers and he taught them songs. One day the sun would rise from the west, he said. They must wait for a saviour.
>
> His name was Shamas, and they called themselves Shamsis. Thus was the village of Junapur in India converted to an esoteric sect of Islam that considered thundering Allah as simply a form of reposing Vishnu.(TGS7-8)

The Gunny Sack rummages through the community history of the Shamsis who are modelled on the Khojas deposit chunks of information latent in the narration. The anecdote of Pir Shama repeats the myth of origin of Shamsi community. The narration unfolding the family saga of four generations is effective in confining the past within the prisms of the present. To Charles Ponnuthurai Sarvan:

> *The Gunny Sack* is both an old and a contemporary work. It is old in that it presents the causes, processes, and consequences of the historical dispossession and wanderings of a particular community, experiences undergone by groups of humankind, going back to our very beginning; contemporary, not only in that the last decades have witnessed an acceleration of such movements (especially from Africa, Asia, and the Far East, to Europe. . . . (512)

The cultural identity of an individual or a particular group of individuals is based on the relationship between subject and discursive practices. It implies that one pole in the construction of identity is the person or the subject and the other pole is constructed by the social, cultural, and political discourses reaching the subject from outside. Consequently, identity is not stationary and subject to modifications. Huttunen concurs, "Identity is seen as constantly changing, since the subject adopts different positions amidst the various intersecting discourses" (58).

The Book of Secrets is a historical documentary supplying fiction in small dosages. The diary of Alfred Corbin is a section of the case book compiled by Pius Fernandez. The diary is a personal record coalescing the fictional histories of individuals of Kikono with the colonial history of East Africa. This chronicle cataloguing the private lives of Asians in Kikono constitutes an anecdote, a narrative articulating the tales of marginalised and unpopular folks. The diary supplies ingredients for counter history and Pius Fernandez's efforts to unravel the mysterious identity of Akber Ali, offers a counter historical infotainment.

Corbin's diary is one of the major voices narrating the colonial history of East Africa from the perspective of a colonial administrator. The entries corresponding to the brief stay of Corbin in Kikono sow the seed of curiosity towards the Asian community in general and Mariamu in particular. The diary serves as a document positing the containment of this particular community and hence forth serving a memorandum of counter history. David Mount agrees, "The narrator, Pius Fernandez, uses the 1913 diary of a former British Assistant District Commissioner (ADC) to reconstruct the history of the Shamsi community in Kikono, a fictional town near the border of Tanganyika and British East Africa" (2). The observations made by

Corbin about the Kikono population furnishing estimated statistical records append to the ontogenesis of this community in Africa:

> Roughly half the Indians belong to the Shamsi sect of Islam and have a separate mosque. They are in touch with Voi, Mombasa, Nairobi, even Bombay and German East. Once or twice a year it seems they hold large feasts, and when they do not go to Voi for that purpose they collect in Kikono community members from the neighbouring towns and give themselves a regular jamboree. There are also Hindu, Punjabi, and Memon families, but quite often the distinction blurs. (TBOS 35)

The imaginary Kikono town constructed in *The Book of Secrets* for allocating some space for this community is forgotten and concealed. The small rural town is denied an authorised position and not acknowledged on the administrative mappings of the administrators. The inhabitants of Kikono represent unheard and seldom heeded voices incarcerated in a geographical ghetto. The Shamsi community originated in Gujarat grows in East Africa under the imperial inclemency and African intimidation of ushering them out.

The anecdote unfolds the life of Dukawallahs settled in Kikono earning their means of life through trade on a small scale. The people of Kikono are very loyal to the colonial rulers and confer an ostentatious reception to Alfred Corbin who represents colonial power in their territory. These people are not pagans like the natives and worship their God in shrines by invoking him with Ginans and meditations. They have a leader who is addressed as the mukhi to guide them and instruct them. They have their own festivals and celebrations glorified through garba dance and many other dancing activities.

Garba dance is Gujarati folk dance that originated in Gujarat. The name garba comes from the Sanskrit term 'garbha' meaning 'womb' and 'deep' meaning a small earthenware lamp. It is an ancient custom practised from time immemorial and at present many traditional garbas are performed around a centrally lit lamp. People dance around the centre, bending sideways at every step, their arms making sweeping gestures, each movement ending in a clap. Garba dance alludes to the inception of this community in *The Book of Secrets*, "The garba enacted the first conversions of the community from Hinduism, several centuries ago in Gujarat, he was told" (TBOS 42).

Africa as a land of enchantment and prosperity appealed to the Shamsis and the roots implanted in India began spreading its branches in Africa. "I laughed, and he joined me. I asked him what his people sought in this country, in the wilderness, so far from their own country and culture. 'Peace and prosperity,' he said. I repeated his words. 'Yes, sir,' he asserted, 'with your protection. We seek but little. Already we have contributed to the Uganda Railway'" (TBOS 49). The mercenary trajectories lead the Khojas into African lands and English imperialism serves as bonus to this migration.

Amriika furnishes a similar anecdote, a very small fragment in the opening pages of the novel narrating the origin of this community. The plot of the novel forms the memoir of Ramji, the protagonist of the novel. Trapped beneath the clamour of advancement, radicalism and liberalism he hails from the humble origins of Shamsi community. The story relating the incident of his community's origin looms throughout the narration casting an ethnical shade.

Ramji, the protagonist is the indirect anecdote teller supplying the narrative in its collateral approach. The amiable present and promising future in America does not surrogate the bond of Ramji to his past. More or less, the entire novel is set in America, yet, the presence of

Shamsi origin lurks in the narration. The origin of Shamsi community in Northwest India constituting the anecdote in spite of its occupying very less textual place fills and occupies readers' thoughts with the evolution of this mystifying communal group.

Diminutive details furnished in Ramji's reminiscence expand the anecdote of origin into the progress phase in East Africa. There are hints, how the community lived under the colonial and post-colonial regime. Beliefs in clairvoyant powers, rapid growth of education and pursuit of higher academic standing, geographical dispersion and intensification of institutions have been discrete aspects of the Shamsi settlement in East Africa. More over, the post-migration era in America and North American states is pored as the principal motif of the novel.

The growth of Shamsi community doesn't stop with its embankment on East African anchorage. The independence of Africa brought in change in the course of Shamsi community and it moved to North America and European countries. *No New Land* supplies a very modern anecdote revealing the contemporary life of Shamsi community in Canada and else where. Rosecliffe Park is the motif set against the background of this anecdote. The experience of Shamsis in the suburbs of Canada is the chief moral procured in this anecdote.

The personal history of Haji Lalani closely following the crisis of the novel which is more or less, the opening of the novel is another typical anecdote narrating the success story of a Shamsi Indian in East Africa. One of the most popular and frequently cited names in the Shamsi community of Dar-es-Salaam, 'Haji Lalani' is more than a name, an atomic representation of an entire historical epoch. These connote the arrival of Shamsi Indians in East Africa and their thriving vocation as shopkeepers.

The anecdote of Sixty-nine Rosecliffe Park describes the immigrant experience of Asians in general and Shamsis in particular. This residence submarines under the hubbub and glamour

of Toronto city hint a subverted image of community people. The drab ambiance estimates the inhabitants, "These buildings, when new and modern the pride of Rosecliffe Park - itself once a symbol of a burgeoning Toronto - now look faded and grey, turning away sullenly from the picturesque scenery behind them to the drab reality in front. Barely maintained, they exist in a state just this side of dissolution" (NNL 2).

The Rosecliffe Park representing the immigrant experience of the Shamsi community is itself an important character and essential backdrop in the novel, *No New Land*. It is a character, as it can be viewed as a personification of different experiences: including, the excitement of novelty; the fear of unfamiliarity; the anxiety to assimilate and adapt; nostalgic past lingering over the present and attempt of mantling disintegrated pieces of communal life. Chelva Kanaganayakam observes, "If one were to speak of what the novel is 'about,' it is about the immigrant population in Toronto, forced to begin a new life in a strange and often unwelcoming land, confronted with obstacles, prejudices and disillusionment" (57). This renders a dichotomy of diverse and analogous experiences leading to awareness of individuals.

Sixty-nine Rosecliffe Park canopies the drifted lives of Asian immigrants who are strayed from their provisional harbour. The anecdote runs across the lives of such drifted individuals. Rosecliffe Park, a home away from home accommodates many Asian families who have formed a communal tie. The tale of Rosecliffe Park underscoring two tragic events culminates in an optimist note. The two tragedies are the accusation of Nurdin Lalani and the vindictive treatment of Ismail on account of racial discrimination. However, Nurdin is vindicated from the charge of rape which is proved false and Ismail is compensated for the injury.

M. G. Vassanji's inheritance of Khoja ethnicity is reflected in all his works and is forthrightly crystallised in his most recent work, *A Place Within: Rediscovering India*. It is

Vassanji's most remarkable memoir chronicling the writer's visit concurrently with ancient history of India. He ornately drafts the geographical, historical, political, social and peculiar nuances of Delhi, Gujarat, Trivandrum, Bhuvaneswar, Calcutta, Bombay and Shimla. The excursions are excavations into immediate and remote history dating from the invasion of Gazni up to the Godhra Kand in Gujarat. Vassanji's findings of the past to locate his roots in India supply the history of Khojas and reveal his ethnicity entrenched in Khojas.

The travelogue focalises on Gujarat, where Vassanji situates his ancestral stemmata. He reminiscences, "I come from simple Indian village and town folk who happened to follow a line of Muslim mystical singer - preachers, the first of whom, per legend, arrived from the Near East nine hundred years ago and was welcomed in the capital Patan, of the Gujarat kingdom" (APWRI 73). Vassanji settles his antecedents in a small village near Jamnagar, Gadhada which accommodates few Patels and Khojas. This stream of rediscoveries and filial renovations pullulate readers with accounts of the Khojas.

Vassanji's expedition to India seeking the history of his ancestors and his retracing of his roots in India supplies the memoir with details on the Khojas belonging to the Khatiawar part of Gujarat. The Khojas are a community, an ethnic group inhumed in reality reality brought to spotlight in Vassanji's writing. Islam is typically classified as Shia, Sunni and this extended ramification of Ismaili sect is more enlightening on the convoluted pattern of Indian ethnicity. Khojas are representatives of the Sufi faith which in the historical regimes embodied religious tolerance and liberalism. Sufis from Persia happen to halt by North West India in their spiritual passage and their presence has been patronised by some rulers. This inspired some Indians to embrace Islamic beliefs of the Persian saints which alleged that Prophet Mohammed is an avatar of Lord Vishnu.

A Place Within: Rediscovering India is undeniably a noteworthy documentary on the history and evolution of Khoja community. Vassanji's memoir renders an overt purview of his ancestors and the protagonist community limned in his works. His expedition seeking his roots emerges to be gratifying, when he finds the acquaintance of his kinsfolk in Ghadadha, a small village near Jamnagar. This odyssey towards his roots furnishes ample facts and myths constituting the dawn of Khoja religion:

> There was, finally, the ancestral mythical memory of India. According to a founding legend of my people, the Gujarati Khojas, a Muslim holy man arrives in medieval times at a remote village in western Gujarat and joins the people in the traditional dance, the garba. As he dances, he sings them a song. The villagers and the mystic - for such he is - go around in circles, clapping hands in rhythm and singing. The people are poor and desperate, for the land is prone to drought; the visitor is new and charismatic and hopeful. They are Krishna devotees, whom he teaches to expect an incarnation of the god to come from the west. You should sing day and night, he sings to them - meaning, I am not sure what, but perhaps this was how they should express their new expectation and joy. Meanwhile they continued worshipping their beloved Krishna. These spiritual dance songs are called the garbi and belong to a larger corpus called ginans. (APWRI ix)

Migration has been a very crucial factor in structuring the nomenclature of present global scenario which is a bi-product of imperialism, cultural assimilation and acculturation. There have been two waves of migration delineated in Vassanji's works which have taken place in the nineteenth century and second half of the twentieth century. The first migration patronised by the English colonisers evinced mass migration of Indians to other English colonies. The second

wave of migration, self-imposed or sentenced on Asians in Some East African colonies has resulted in the immigration of Indians to other countries. The wave of immigration is hinted at in Vassanji's memoir reminiscing on the inauguration of his ancestor's interminable journey:

> In such a dhow my paternal great-grandfather, Nanji Lalji, went to Mombasa, then proceeded to the interior of what is now Kenya. He settled in a trading village called Kibwezi and became the local mukhi. My maternal grandparents went to Zanzibar some years later. The journey would have taken about two weeks, and as far as I know, as for most other migrants, it was a one-way trip - though some men did return to marry, and they returned in style, newly wealthy. The old dhows were carried back and forth by the trade winds. The young man's father told us that pot makers (the kumbhad) would depart with their clay pots in little boats and let the trade winds take them to the East African coast, where they would sell their wares and return to Gujarat when the winds reversed. But many of the kumbhad did emigrate, and in Dar es Salaam they had their own settlement, or wadi, where as children we would go and buy clay from them to make models for school projects. (APWRI 297)

The progress of Shamsi community is visibly explicated in the narrations of Vassanji's novels. The evolutionary phase dating back to sixth century BC and the emigrational wave in the nineteenth century is anachronistically rendered. The immigrant experience of the Shamsi community is dichotomous proving both the congenial temperament and Canadian racial bias in store for the Asians. Indira Bhat observes, "*No New Land* moves onwards from the *The Gunny Sack* dilemma of the immigrants and tries to resolve successfully the conflicts of the protagonist [to] attain self-awareness" (78).

It is often assumed that there has been no place for a concept related to caste in Islamic society, and hence any caste-like structures in Indian Muslim society must be the result of accretions or borrowings from the Hindu society, or customs inherited from pre-Islamic times. This absence of caste hierarchy in Islam appealed to the low caste Hindu conversion. The chief reason for its success would have been the particular attractiveness of Islam, as an egalitarian faith, for the lower castes especially the untouchables. The cities and kasbas established by the new conquerors have been spaces of liberty; they have permitted the most disfavoured people to rise in the social hierarchy, by opening new economic outlets.

The boulevard of religious conversion has resulted in the emergence of various sects and communities based on their values and occupations. The Hindus who have been converted to Islam have the sway of their livelihood on their newly formed communities. This epoch of religious conversion and cultural transmigration has witnessed the surfacing of many socio-cultural ethnic communities and the Khoja community has been no exception to this.

Religions in India are very much influenced by the hierarchy of caste systems and stratified accordingly. The social stratification existing in contemporary India can be extracted from the caste and community history of medieval times. One of the diametric institutions the Islamic invasions in India encountered was the insidious caste system. However, the shadow of caste-based classification enveloped the dispersing Islam. Many Hindus were converted to Islam especially, many belonging to lower caste. Eventually, the classless society yielded to the socially hierarchical powers.

It is evident that notable religious transformation has taken place in Gujarat on account of its geographical expediency. Gujarat is located in the westernmost portion of central India; it includes the region of Kutch, Saurashtra, and the territories between the rivers Banas and

Damanganga. Islam arrived early in Gujarat, with immigrant communities of Arab trading communities which settled on the western seacoast of India as early as the eighth Century A.D. Eventually, the Persian Sufis and religious pilgrims conjoined the growing Islamic kindred. Eleventh and twelfth centuries witnessed the arrival of Persian traders and many of these early merchants were Ismaili, both Mustaali and Nizari. They laid the foundation of the Bohra and Khoja communities.

The Shamsi community representing the Khoja community embodies a marginalised minority ethnic group. From the very beginning of the emergence of the Khojas, subversion, inferiority and retrenchment have been their condition. It is believed that the Hindus who converted to Khoja Islam dreaded their rulers and practised their religion clandestinely. The elusiveness of their position is one of the most important factors inducing their migration to East Africa. The migration undertaken to East Africa seems not to have resolved the problem of religious disintegration or their ethnic positions. The cultural hierarchy presenting majority native culture and transcendency of European mores grading the Khoja community in-between is palpably demonstrated in the novels.

Minority yields, majority rules-has been a well-practised code in all spheres of life. A minority branded group encounters several challenges to survive and to keep hold of its own individuality. The Khoja community is a minor community scattered geographically and integrated with stronger communal knots. The history of its origin and evolution is noteworthy in many respects.

The so-called Shamsi community delineated in Vassanji's works is modelled upon the Khoja community of Khatiawar region and Northwest region of India. The Khoja community is a cultural and religious sect whose origins and history have not been elaborately studied hitherto.

The origin of Khoja community can be traced in Shakti Marg Hinduism associated with the Ksatriya caste who collectively formed the Lohana community. However, in the early fourteenth century this community witnessed a momentous transformation, as a Persian missionary influenced the Lohanas with his Sufi convictions. The followers of this Persian Ismaili saint, Pir Sadr-ud-deen were given the title 'Khwaja' which eventually became Khoja.

Ahmed Karamustafa, in his *Sufism: The Formative Period*, traces the origin and evolution of Sufism all over the world. He elaborates the influence of this mystic cult both socially and politically in Asia and elsewhere. He opines, "The process by which certain powerful training masters also came to be venerated as popular saints is most clearly visible in cases where the master's example was perpetuated in local shrine communities" (143). The Khojas tracing their evolution in early Sufism in India is evident.

The Khojas are an ethno-cultural community rooted in South Asia. The community is dispersed all over the world especially, Gujarat, Maharashtra in India; Sindh, Karachi in Pakistan; East African countries and North America. They are originally the adherents of Ismaili Shia Islam. However, in due course of time, a minority group among Khojas embraced Sunni Islam. The Khojas in India were basically from Cutch, Khatiawar, and Gujarat. However, the Khojas have been further divided into three groups due to disparities in religious beliefs leading to turmoil among them. The Ismaili influence, irrespective of the factional groups exerts considerable influence on Khojas. The Khojas have been regarded as Guptis, as they keep their new religion under secrecy in order to keep peace with their Hindu rulers. The Khojas, basically traders by occupation preferred migration to East Africa seeking economic prospects under the English rule. As debentured labourers and as traders, they arrived in East Africa settling down in Zanzibar, Dar-es-Salaam, Mombassa, and some other cities.

The Khojas are directed by the Aga Khan, who has followers in Pakistan, India, Iran, Yemen, and East Africa. The forty sixth Nizari Ismaili Imam Hasan Ali Shah (1817-1881), who received the title of Aga Khan ('lord') from the monarch of Iran, migrated from Iran to India in the 1840s. His descendants to the Nizari Ismaili Imamate adopted modernisation policies and introduced new institutional frameworks for guiding the affairs of their Khoja followers. The present Aga Khan, Prince Karim, is the forty-ninths direct descendant from Ali in the male line. The Ismaili followers of the Aga Khan avowedly believe that the Quran was time bound and was not meant to be a Universal message for all times. The Aga Khan has officially declared himself, before his followers, as the 'Mazhar of Allah on earth'. The word 'mazhaf means 'copy' or 'manifest'.

The Khojas are basically centralised in Gujarat State, India. However, this community spreads widely and in India from Sindh, the conversion spreads to Kutch, then to Khatiawar and through Gujarat to Bombay. Pir Sadr-ud-deen laid the foundation of the communal organisation, built the first assembly and prayer halls (Jamaat Khanahs) and appointed the community leaders (mukhis). The Khojas live chiefly in lower Sindh, Kutch, Gujarat, Bombay and in extensive diaspora, particularly in East and South Africa, Arabia, Sri Lanka and Myanmar (Burma).

The Khojas are principally divided into three further subdivisions: Ithna-Asheri Khojas, Bohras and Nizari Ismaili Khojas. The Ithna-Asheri Khojas and Nizari Ismaili Khojas are predominantly found in India, East Africa and North America. The Shia Ithna-Asheri population of East Africa is constituted predominantly by the Khojas. There have been Shia Ithna-Asheris from the Punjab, who were located in Nairobi, the capital city of Kenya as well. The Shia Ithna-Asheris from the Punjab have been chiefly those recruited in the labour force for the railway project in East Africa.

The Shamsis accommodated in M. G. Vassanji's novels represent the migrated Khoja community in East Africa in general and Khoja Ismaili in particular. There are very few documents and factual resources evidencing the settlement of Khojas in East Africa. There are few committees functioning for the welfare of the community settled in East Africa and some literature in the form of magazines and periodicals is generated as well. according to Khairan one of the factors for dearth of documents on Ismaili Khoja community is:

> A study of primary as well as secondary documents, some of them rare and others that have been withdrawn from circulation or that were written for internal circulation in the ancient form of Sindhi script called Khojki, reveals that the process of proselytizing has gone through three distinct stages. The last two are only a century and a half old. A few Agakhani Ismaili scholars who have compiled a bibliography of Ismaili literature, and others who have access to these documents, are well aware of the fact that the conversion of Hindus to the Ismaili faith has not been firsthand and has gone through more than one phase. But these scholars are also cognizant of the fact that under Article 14 of the Constitution of the Shia Imami Ismaili Muslims (1986), any Ismaili who prints, publishes, or circulates any material or makes any statement or convenes a meeting or assembly purporting to be on behalf of, or in the name of, or relating to, the Imam, the Ismaili Tariqah, the Jamaat (a congregation or community), and any Ismaili Council or Institution without the written permission of the National Council within whose jurisdiction he or she resides shall be liable to disciplinary action, and the offender can be expelled from the community. It is high time that these

> kinds of stipulations and restrictions are lifted and that Ismaili scholars have the encouragement and support of community leaders in publishing their findings. (3)

However, there are some trajectories and trails leading to the few resources on Ismaili Khoja community. The Institute of Ismaili Studies is one such resource centre and library facilitating some research. Nevertheless, this accessibility of the library is limited, and access to the print material is more or less, inaccessible for researchers from other streams. However, the online web library of the institute is rather accessible and accommodating in procuring some scholarly materials.

Ginans are another kind of literary reservoir availing information on the inception and early history of the Khoja community. These are spiritual lyrics written basically in Khojki and Gujarati scripts. Come what may, at present, these have undergone translations into several languages including English and Hindi. There are several hundreds of ginans and most of these are authored by Pirs and the rest by their disciples. An article titled, "Ginans: A Tradition of Religious Poetry Amongst the Ismailis" describes:

> Indian Ismaili tradition attributes the origin of this poetry to several charismatic figures or Pirs. It is the unanimous opinion of scholars that the ginans were first transmitted as oral tradition. It is not known whether at least some manuscripts may have existed simultaneously — the earliest copy identified so far is dated 1736. The manuscripts were all written in a special script, Khojki, which was known only to members of the community.

The Nizari Ismaili Khoja community, one of the subdivisions of Shia Khoja community is all inclusive and is spread in many parts of the world. An article titled, "Khoja - A Socio-Historical Perspective," notifies, "Those who continued to follow the Aga Khan were known as

the Nizari Ismaili Khojas who unlike the Sunni Khojas, were Shiites. These Khojas were the largest in number and would remain the dominant group." Islam is generally considered having two principal divisions: Shia and Sunni. The Sunni Muslims, who constitute the larger group among the two, believe that Prophet Muhammad has not issued any successor to preside the community after his death. Whereas, Shia Muslims, who represent a minority within Islam, believe that the Prophet did in fact nominate and appoint a successor, his cousin and son-in-law, 'Ali'.

The Ismaili community estranged from the majority of the Shia population over a succession dispute following the death of Jafar al-Sadiq, the fifth Ismaili Imam. The Ismailis traced the line of Imamate through Jafar al-Sadiq's eldest son, Ismail, and on to his son, Muhammad. The Ismaili line has come apart again following the death of Imam and Fatimid Caliph al-Mustansir Billah. Whilst the Caliphate of the Fatimid Empire was officially given to Mustali, many Ismailis lent their support to Mustali's elder brother, Nizar, leading to the initiation of the Nizari Ismaili sect.

The Nizaris have been located chiefly in Persia and Syria, following the chism. Gradually, the Nizari Ismaili sect has made its way into India during the Mongol conquest and Turk invasions. During the twelfth to fourteenth centuries, missionaries known as pirs or dais have been accountable for proselytising activities in India. Most Hindu converts to Nizari Ismailism have been from the Lohana caste. Traditionally, these converts have been addressed as Thakur, which means lord or master. Eventually they came to be called as Khojas, which is derived from the word 'khwaja,' the Persian equalent for Thakur. The Khoja community has grown and developed its own traditions and ethos in the next six centuries. It remained

physically remote from the head quarters of Imamate in Persia and instead has been largely led by pirs, who were appointed by the Imam.

The 'assassin' anecdote in Vassanji's *The Assassin's Song* which occupied a meagre place in the novel renders another countenance of reality. The Nizari Ismailis have always been targeted by Muslims and several Anti-Ismaili polemical writing has been produced. The Ismailis have been called heretic, as well as atheists. Moreover, the Anti-Ismaili Campaign—in the course of their history the Ismailis have been accused of various heretical teachings and practices and, every so often, a multitude of myths and misconceptions circulated about them. At a point of time in history, the Nizaris have also been called as 'assassins'.

However, the label 'Nizari Ismaili' tag the Khojas to a religious lineage whereas, 'Khoja' represent them as a socio-cultural community. The Khojas represent an integral part of the Nizari communities scattered in several countries. They are not only bound together by their beliefs, but also by their ties to trade background. Further, their identity is more or less, a product of history constituted by Colonial rule, waves of Migration, postcolonial era and globalisation.

The early Khojas arrived in East Africa from Cutch and Khatiawar. Their influx in the East African coast is attributed to several factors. One of the major factors is that these parts of India were stricken with long years of famine and families that lived below the survival level considered the alternative of migration. Dearth of employment opportunities triggered the departure of Khoja traders from Gujarat and Bombay. The traders embarked on their voyage to the Coast of East Africa facilitated by the North East monsoon. Many of the traders who arrived in East Africa recognised hidden possibilities of impending exploration and have determined to anchor their destiny in the coastal port cities of East Africa. This encouraged many other Indians to cross the continent seeking new avenues for trade and bread.

The Khojas began sailing down the coast of Africa in the seventeenth century chiefly with mercenary intention. Initially they were a small community and the community began to grow considerably when the largely farming population of West India moved in search of a better material life following a series of droughts and famines in Gujarat. The Khojas had settled in various other regions, including Kenya, Uganda, Tanganyika, Madagascar, South Africa, and Mozambique. In all these new settlements, the Khojas adapted themselves to unknown circumstances and life under the ruling colonial power; acquiring the local and colonial languages and assimilating parts of both local and colonial cultures.

The Khojas being trade aficionados chose coastal terrains and port cities for their settlement. According to Calvin, ". . . there were Khwajas in most of the Gulf ports, Bombay, Karachi, Zanzibar and Mombasa" (50). The Khojas travelled years together down the coast of Africa recognising a congenial commercial aura in East Africa and settled down in East African coast. The new land opened limitless opportunities for the aspiring Khoja traders and the new environment and other pervading influences called for a reorientation. Zanzibar accommodated one of the largest Khoja communities.

The adoption of foster society proved conducive and beneficial for the Khojas who monopolised the East African market. The community being a minority and estranged from both Africans and Europeans settled themselves in an in-between world. The Khojas lived in intact communities presided over by a leader known as mukhi who directs all social and commercial activities. The history of the Khojas as a persecuted minority has resulted in the necessity of a close-knit family and a strong affiliation with the local community. However, The Khojas were to undergo a second migration after the independence of East Africa from European colonisers due to nationalisation of their private assets.

The early and late nineteenth century had in store many challenges for the Khojas who silhouetted against the strange land marching forward with determination and strategies. In order to establish wide-ranging business centres and widening the distributive trade, they travelled to far away places on foot and on animals. They have been esteemed highly for their probity and reliability and were appointed as Agents for various government services during the early period of British rule. They have been among the importers of commodities, exporters of produce and promoters of agriculture and trade. Concisely, the contribution of Indian Khojas to the growth of the economy and the country at large has been generous.

Tanzania and its neighbouring countries, inhabitated by diverse ethnic groups, confront a speckled and assorted ethnicity. Besides the numerous native tribes existing in Africa, there are Arabs who arrived in East Africa centuries ago and have established themselves as one among the natives. The governance of many of the East African territories relies on the Arabs inside the country or outside from Saudi Arabia. The Arab population rooted in Tanzania and other nations like Uganda and Kenya promoted Islam and eventually many natives converted themselves to Islam. In spite of the Khoja community being affiliated with Islam, they hardly mingle with Arabs. They strongly resist intermarriages between the Arabs and themselves, in order to preserve the regulations and sanctity of their clan.

The living species in minority, with singular dispositions and which differ from ways of the world succumb to comparatively rapid extinction. The Asians sensed the symptoms of their being an endangered clan. The influence of Arabic mores tried to impose itself on the new arrivals. Simultaneously, the proximity with the natives threatened the obligation of Native culture on them. Nevertheless, the superior influence of European colonisers was the hardest to shun.

Living together in communities has been a handy modus operandi instrumentalised by the Khoja immigrants in East Africa and elsewhere in the world. Their communal living has been not merely ethnocentric, yet, formed on the shared objective of survival and progress. They elected one among them as the leader of their individual faction, coordinating and guiding them onwards.

It has been observed that the migration of the Khojas from India to East Africa had a profound impact on the community. The first migration experience imparted to them many lessons as to adapt and assimilate. It has acted as a catalyst in refining their understanding of social and communal living in harmony. The Khojas have learnt to live intact and integrated in a unique way. It is undeniable that the migration experience of Khojas in East Africa brought in transformation in material and social lives.

There have been few distinguished intellectuals and thinkers who contributed towards the many-sided development of the community. The influence of Allama Haji Gulamali Haji Ismail of Bhavnagar, India, has been immense in the early days when the Khojas were undeniably novitiates. He has authored nearly 300 books, primarily on the theme of spiritual liturgy and ethics. His scholarship and services have been of tremendous aid in the preservation of Khoja integrity. Prolific writers like Gulamhusein Mohamed Vali Dharsi and Mohamed Jaffer Sheriff Dewji have been acknowledged for their spiritual scholarship and encyclopaedias in India as well. Mohamed Jaffer Sheriff Dewji is another scholar hailing from East African Khoja community who has written on diverse themes.

These few individuals have acted as agents of influence, and stimulated resistance among the community people against detrimental changes. The Khoja community has undergone slight changes in the social and religious beliefs. The arrival of Ulemas from Iran to regenerate the

religious doctrines among the uprooted and disoriented Shia Khojas has attempted to make them in essence religious than traders. However, the sway of religion did not last long and the transitional political state of Africa necessitated more awareness to re-erect social and political consciousness. This progressive element began to express itself articulately and persuasively.

The emergent shift of attentiveness occurred chiefly because of some rationales. One of the reasons has been the uprising of the native Africans against the colonial rule and their urge for independence. However, this has been, in fact, a stage set to change the very fabric, structure and attitudes of the society, especially that of non-African origin and Khojas were no exception.

The impressions of modern careening world have contributed their fair share to socio-cultural living. The modern phase is an umbrella idiom canopying the revolution in political and economical thoughts which radically alter the material and social conditions and also the impuissant and confounded consciousness of people. The picture of the world presented in contrast with the powerful expansion all around, has been neither germane nor decipherable. The duality, therefore have been the duality of negation; a disjuncture has been created and people begin doubting their beliefs.

The Khoja community has witnessed another influential personality who rejuvenated the deterioting social and religious values among the clansmen. The inspiring ideas of Maulana Razavi received a grand impetus from the society which is becoming fully aware of the creeping changes all around. Known for his realistic spiritual ideals, he is believed to have created spiritual reality in the context of modern realism. Somehow, the community has managed to keep intact its ethos and at the same time has wrapped in the collocates of changing phase.

As a result, a federation of Khojas evolved in the last two decades of the first half of the twentieth century. Marhum Haji Abdul Rasul Haji Nasser Virjee, Marhum Haji Ebrahim Husein

Sheriff Dewji, and Marhum Haji Mohamed Ali Meghji are a some of the leaders or presidents of the federation. In spite of their inability to brace roots, the Khojas have managed to survive the thrust of impendent reallocations. As the community expanded in size and number at the East African Coast, and at the remote interior, a requirement to preclude the difficulties caused by dispersion became a focus of attention. From early thirties of this twentieth century, the expansion and diffusion of Jamaats has been substantial. Writers and thinkers began to disseminate an idea of forming a central organisation to which these Jamaats would be affiliated, thus instilling a sense of common belonging and creating a social interaction.

The establishment of the federation has been a precursor of far-sightedness of the leaders; a mere dread of decadence; or consequence of a sense of insecurity felt in an adopted land; is a very excellent degree of premeditated social strategy. The latent objective of the federation has been integrity and survival. The federation groomed Khoja Shias Ithna-Asheris of Africa to seek suitable position in the World which has been rapidly changing with the technological advance, scientific outlook, and political upheavals.

The federation has played an inevitable role in the promotion of the community's welfare. The revolution of Zanzibar in the year 1964 witnessed extensive annihilation in form of lives and material goods. The federation had to carry out the extraordinary task of rehabilitating the displaced and uprooted members caused by political sweeps. Similarly, the year 1972 is red-letter in the history of Khoja community, when the Asians were expelled from Uganda and the federation was utterly wiped out.

M. G. Vassanji excavates into the family histories of his characters and vestiges along genealogical lines. *The Gunny Sack* depicts four generations of the protagonist's family in order to implicate the propelling phase of personal history. Many thinkers believe in rummaging

through the genealogical history to reconsider the present. As Baert opines, " . . . whilst traditionally history seeks to reconstruct and explain the past, the main focus of the genealogical method, used by Nietzsche and Foucault, is to reassess and destabilise the present" (22).

After the First World War, the Khojas have been more or less successful in intensifying their roots in their new home. They had built their first school in Zanzibar in 1905 and carried on along these courses, building a Boys' School in Mombasa in 1918, followed by the Girls' School in 1919. This period witnessed escalating solidity and growth of the Khoja community. Institutionalisation has been brought in order to fortify the economic and social welfare of this community.

In East Africa, the Khojas educated themselves in imbibing the alloy of different cultural ambiances and idiosyncratic communal identity. In the process of adapting and acquiring new cultural subtleties, they have relented to shed away their some Indian habits. For instance, the Khojas who have been farmers in India succumbed to mercantile trade and increasingly became traders in East Africa.

This alteration in vocation has brought forth changes in their position economically and socially, eventually giving them more disposable income and bringing them into contact with more varied groups of people. These changes have influenced the ways of the Khojas settled in East Africa which are quite different from those settled in India.

There are cultures which become extinct due to dearth of economic and social support. Such cultures which are exposed to extermination are regarded as 'risk culture' and Scott Lash elucidates on the possibilities of a culture being risk culture and the remedial measures to thwart extinction. Institutions either social or religious are of immense importance in the growth of

communities: hence the remark of Scott Lash regarding such cultures without institutions is, "anti-institutional sociations" (47).

Boys school in Mombasa has been a remarkable contribution by the Khojas. M. G. Vassanji refers to the institutionalisation of his fictional community. He elucidates how the Shamsis take pride in the establishment of institutions especially schools. In fact, he has constructed Dar-es-Salaam's Boy school in his imaginary terrains. *The Book of Secrets* celebrates the educational institutionalisation of the community:

> At long last the school that the Precious Jubilee had made possible was ready. A school so beautiful it took the breath away. There was nothing like it in the country. Only Nairobi's exclusive white schools came close. Community members came on excursions to see it, this monument they'd built, walking for miles, having their picnics, and walking all the way back to their shop-homes. It came with cricket and football grounds, running track. Its motto, appropriately Latin, was Labor Omnia Vincit, its symbol Promethean fire. The Shamsis had learned the colonial game well. They played by the rules but they played to win. The sacrifices they would count later - or their poets would, those who passed through our hands at the school. (TBOS 267)

Eventually, the establishment of the community in East Africa has marked the beginning of institutional development as well. The Khojas established prayer halls, schools, housing projects, hospitals, and economic and social welfare institution during their time in East Africa. This expanded institutionalisation among the Khojas paved the way for the community to become more centralised in East Africa. This elevated the social and economic functioning of the community affording a comely position. Moreover, a scholarly article in Ismaili Web claims that

this act of institutionalisation has been a service to humanity as well, "In a number of the countries where they live, the Ismailis have evolved a well-defined institutional framework through which they have, under the leadership and guidance of the Imam, established schools, hospitals, health centres, housing societies and a variety of social and economic development institutions for the common good of all citizens regardless of their race or religion."

There have been numerous studies undertaken to decipher cultures which are intertwined due to globalisation and assimilation. The settlement of Asians in East African nations constitutes one of the important factors in intriguing the social organisation of African nations. The European colonialism, the Arab settlers, the Asians and the native Africans have contributed a calico social order. John R. Campbell discusses the emerging global identities with reference to African societies in *Identity and Affect: Experiences of Identity in a Globalising World*. He asserts, "In such societies any assumption concerning the logical coherence or shared nature of culture presents obvious methodological and epistemological problems regarding its conceptualisation and study" (169).

Migration has been a favourable itinerary among the Khojas and it has proved again adaptable in the times of repulsion of African home. However, this time the factors responsible for migration have been political rather than economical.

The expulsion of Asians from Uganda fractured the gradually settling position of the Asians in East Africa and culminated in coercion in neighbouring countries. This exerted an unconcealed situation for the federation to tackle and in spite of its moderate efforts, the Khojas moved away to other countries and continents.

The new phase of African independence and radicalised political ideals complemented the Khoja community with numerous challenges. Somehow, after renouncing the African abode

they succeeded in seeking their new homes in England, the U.S.A., Canada, other European countries, the Middle East with a section of them back home in India or Pakistan. By now, their ties with Africa have begun weakening in spite of their protracted attachment and extraordinary experience in the African lands.

Displacement of a person or an object has been a matter of disquieting consequence at all times. The displacement of the Khojas from Uganda conjugated with a sturdy migration from other parts of Eastern Africa has rendered a traumatic impact on the Community. The tremor of this hard luck has not escaped the Khoja society.

The most notable traits of these settling immigrants have been that they have promptly adopted their new milieu and adapted to all likely changes. In fact, they have well-nigh resumed their usual social habits and have begun organising themselves in the same old fashion as that of Eastern Africa. Here again there are Jamaats, based on almost the same type of constitution, and spiritual projects receiving the same attention as earlier. In a very short period, buildings for community clubs have been either purchased or constructed.

The Khoja community has well settled in their new homes after the tedious passage of second migration. They have successfully reconciled with unfamiliar terrains and set up an external surrounding compatible to the acquired living habits. The Khojas have constructed their new homes and hopes on their ability to adapt and integrate. In spite of the newfangled and unrequited contraventions, they have learnt to shed off unease and embrace opportunities.

A community is susceptible to minor transformation in course of time and distance. It is a well-proved theory of change that lapse of time and geographical remoteness bring in limited modification in a socio-cultural faction. The Khoja Ismaili community succumbs to external ethnic invasions and in some cases alters unreservedly. As a result, the same community is

located in different parts of the world with slight variations in name or cultural habits. Evidently, the presence of the Khoja community can be traced in different places in different forms.

Allan H. Calvin documents the socio-ethnic probations of the Indian merchants in Muscat in *The School of the Oriental and Afrit Studies*. This scholarly article probes into the genealogical traces of Indian immigrant traders and imply different adaptations of the Khoja sect. The Khoja community can be traced in some other parts of the world, partly estranged from their Indian origins. The community is known by other names elsewhere in the globe, however, recognised by its domain in commerce. Allan H. Calvin catalogues the Indian merchant communities in Muscat and indistinctly focuses on the Khoja community, "A second group of Indians lived within the domains of the sultan, the Khwajas (Khojas). Very little is known about the Khwaja community of 'Oman, which goes by the name Luti,' and virtually nothing has been written" (48).

Cleavage of ethnic groups has been a common attribute of all cultural and religious cults. The nature of such ethnocentric sects is variable and prone to changes with slightest incitation. In a way, the Khoja community cleaving to Shia Ismaili sect clung to its truncated past. The Khoja community known as Luti community does not share the same origin and the same cultural habits of the Khojas settled in East Africa. In fact, there is sharp contrast between the origins of the two communities as Calvin points out, "However, unlike the majority of Khwajas, the Luwatiyya were probably not Lohanas but Bhattias" (49).

The Khojas are traced in Punjab region of India and Pakistan. It is witnessed that a Hindu trader converted to Islam is known by the name Khoja as well. The Khojas of Shahpur are more or less entirely Khatris. The Khojas of Jhang, on the other hand, are Rajput converts to Islam; while some at least of the Lahore Khojas claim Bhatia origin and one section of the Ambala

Khojas are Kayasths. In Northwest Punjab and northern districts of the Northwest frontier province, the term Paracha is preferred by Hindu traders who convert to Islam. Consequently while the Parachas are a recognized and wealthy community, the term Khoja is used for miscellaneous Muhammadan traders.

The Khoja community living in intact groups closely follows the idealised comportments of their guide. Jamaat system is the traditional expression of communal solidarity. Gujarati Muslim society has a distinctive custom known as Jamaat Bandi, literally meaning communal solidarity. It is designed to police the affairs of the community and apply sanctions against infractions of the communal code. Almost all the main Gujarat communities, such as the Memon, Chhipa, Muslim Ganchi, Khoja, Bohra and Sunni Bohra have caste associations, known as Jamaats.

The Khojas at present recognise Prince Karim Aga Khan IV as their forty ninth Imam. The present Nizari imam concentrates on modernisation policies of his predecessor and develops new programmes and institutions. On the whole, the South Asian and other Nizari Ismaili Khojas numbering several millions, under the leadership of their recent imams, have entered the twenty-first century as a prosperous and progressive community with a distinct identity and a variety of regional traditions.

The imaginary villages and towns constructed in the premises of Vassanji's creative terrain penetrate into the lives of some people constituting the Khoja community. The Matamu in *The Gunny Sack*, Pir Baag in *The Assassin's Song*, Kikono in *The Book of Secrets* and The Rosecliffe Park in *No New Land* limn the less popular people, subverted and marginalised by the impending social and cultural hegemony. These ghostly residential areas or asylum of the Khojas who live in caravans are repressed by the powerful flow of power.

The Khoja community delineated in Vassanji's novels shares some similar aspects with the Kashmiri Muslim and Hindu community in Pachigam delineated in Rushdie's *Shalimar the Clown*. As the Khojas are traders by occupation and so are the people of Pachigam—cooks and performers by occupation. Pachigam, a small village in Kashmir renowned for its band entertainers renders a microscopic vista of the India performing tight-rope walking between secularism and communal mayhem caused by religious fanaticism in general and Islamic fundamentalism in particular. The colonial rule and the threats of African impeded the growth of Khoja community settled in Tanzania and in neighbouring countries. Likewise, the coercions of religious militarism uprooted this community from Pachigam and wiped it off for ever.

The Shamsi community marks a positive impression mobilising the guiding principle of religious parity and secularism. One of the very particular reasons for this permissiveness is their lineage from Hinduism and the liberal convictions of their religion. The Shamsi characters limned in the novels imbibe a secular faith without deserting their Hindu ancestry. This fictional code of religious ethics corresponds in reality with the Khojas in the words of Khairan:

> It is an undisputed fact that the converted Khojas had been observing Hinduistic as well as Islamic rites and rituals, even after their conversion. Many of these converts believed it was in their social and business interest to hold on to their former Hindu identities and continue their trade and cultural relationships with their former kinsmen. Hence, many of them accepted Islam but did not adopt Islamic names or change their dresses. Even today, one comes across Khoja families whose last names are Ramji, Shamji, Kanji, Govindji, and so forth. (92)

Pandemonium is the most apposite expression to designate the present state of affairs where globalisation and separatism are in vogue. When tendencies like international

negotiations, affable treaties among nations, worldwide network fabricate the world on one hand, communal insurgencies, religious terrorism, global cold war propagate separatism on the other.

Religious fundamentalism pervading the contemporary era under the folds of globalisation and encroachment is as dangerous as a predator. The idea of considering other cultures and other religions is a noble and counteractive requisite. Nationalism is next to religious and cultural equality and this can obliterate fundamentalism. Lowry's comment in this context is quite remarkable, "Nationalism shouldn't dictate homogeneity in practice or belief, but rather seek the enrichment of diverse social rituals" (16).

The Shamsi community outlined on the model of Nizari Ismaili Khoja bases its ideals on Hindu mythologies and miracle tales of Pirs. One of the reasons is the translation of Great Epics and Vedas into Persian language during the Persian and Mughal invasion in India. This enabled the Sufis and other spiritual leaders to get acquainted with Hindu and Vedic literature. However, the inherited connection to Hinduism is another important cause for this uniqueness:

> While idol worshipping is condemned, Hindu mythology is accepted. 'Ali is described as the Tenth Avatar or incarnation of the deity', and the Imams are identical with him. The Quran is considered the last of the Vedas, which are viewed as holy scriptures whose true interpretation is known to the pirs. The religious role of the pir or guru is extolled. Acceptance of the true religion will free the believer from further rebirths and open Paradise for him, which is described in Islamic terms, while those failing to recognize the imams must pass through another cycle of rebirths. (Qtd. in Khairan 93)

Anecdotal analysis leads further into deep and explains the blurred lines between the distinction between fact and fiction. The fictitious characters appear to be born out of facts and

out of history. Nur Fazal in Vassanji's *The Assassin's Song* embodies the magnificence of Sufi qualities and the advent of Pirs in India. The miracles of Nur Fazal correspond with Satgur Nur, one of the mystic Pirs in Ismaili literature:

> The name of this Dai in Ismaili literature is Pir Satgur Nur. Various miracles are ascribed to this legendary preacher by Ismaili authors, such as making Hindu gods and goddesses (statues of stones) dance at his command. The claims for Pir Satgur Nur being deputed by an Ismaili Imam from Persia are conflicting and cannot be substantiated. (Khairan 12)

The inspiring socio-cultural and religious community living in Vassanji's fictional premises is imaginary, "The Shamsi community is fictitious . . ." (TGS IX). Vassanji's fictional Shamsi community shares some similarities with the Khojas who call themselves Shamsis. Shah Shams has been the mentor of Pir Sadr-ud-deen and many of his followers have taken directly to the teacher. This resolves the anonymity behind the fictional Shamsi community. As per Khairan's accounts:

> Today, there are thousands of descendants of the original converts and adherents of Shah Shams in Pakistan, India, Tibet, and Kashmir who regularly visit the shrine of their Awliya. These devotees of Shah Shams are known as Shamsi. A vast majority of them follow the Sunni Tariqah of Islam, and the rest are Ithna-ashries. With the exception of a few families in Punjab and the Northwest Frontier Province, there are no Ismaili Shamsis in India or Pakistan. *Noorum-Mubin,* a history book (1951 ed., p. 330) written by an Ismaili author acknowledges that the majority of the converts of Pir Shams now belong to the Ahle Sunnat Jamaat meaning, belong to the community of Sunni Muslims. (13)

In addition, there are other allusions to the name ' Sham' which demystifies the mystery of the name of this particular community. In an article on *Ismaili web,* entitled "'Ismaili Communities - South Asia' Encyclopedia of Modern Asia", Farhad Daftary and Azim nanji locating the historical origin of Nizari Ismaili community refer to Pir Shams Al-din, "Pir Shams al-Din is the earliest figure associated with the commencement of Nizari Ismaili activities in Sind. The Nizari dawa continued to be preached secretly in Sind by descendants of Shams."

Salmagundi of anecdotes with factual ambiances and fictional characters is intriguingly innovative approach to study history. Vassanji's narratives moving forward and backward in time and space rummage through some concealed truth and identity. His characters bearing resemblance with original legendary figures in remote history suggest some curious disclosure. Jones remarks:

> In all his novels, Vassanji's creation of 'part-legendary, part-real ancestor' figure, his own stipulated raison d'etre as a writer, is constantly obscured by the recognition that his chosen originary figure only ever provides a qualified beginning. He is always deferred back to a less known father, a less acknowledged mother, a beginning elsewhere in time, further back in geography. (28)

It is apparent that there is little scholarship achieved in the study of Nizari Ismaili Khoja community. Likewise, the character of Sona in Vassanji's *The Gunny Sack, Amriika* and *The Book of Secrets* is implicative of scanty comprehension of Shamsi community. In *The Gunny Sack,* when Kulsum objects to Sona's going abroad for higher education and inquires his intentions, he expresses his wish to learn, "'History - of our community'" (268).

In *Amriika,* Sona reappears as an enthusiastic researcher excavating the history of his community, "Sona's cause had to do with the history and beliefs of their people, who over the last few centuries had maintained intact a syncretistic belief, combining Islam and Hinduism" (204-05). He penetrates into the congested chapters of neglected history and bubbles with exhilaration at every single discovery:

> Yes, Sona was immersed in the past, reconstructing, as he put it, all the byways taken by a small community of Indians over four or five centuries, who simply, and seeing no contradiction, had extended their customs and beliefs and love for their gods to embrace Islam. His excitement would get feverish, catchy, as he explained his arcane discoveries - 'Look, Ramji . . . this word . . . there's no dictionary in existence that has the meaning even close to what we had. . . . It's a fossil, it's our very own, a clue to our past!' He was the scholar, the easy chair in his room surrounded by a wall of books, half-read, unread, read - but - still - needed, books bought cheaply from the religion - and - mysticism basement of the Harvard Bookstore. And in his exciting world of Sufi and Hindu mendicants walking the busy highways from Punjab to Maharashtra in the medieval India of small rajas and Mogul emperors . . . Vietnam? It was a little remote. (83)

The Book of Secrets renders a similar idea through the same character of Sona, a research scholar who regrets the dearth of historical awareness of his community, "I have always railed - given the opportunity - against the lack of a sense of history in us. (Recently I gave a talk to that effect entitled 'What Is Not Observed Does Not Exist' - . . . " (TBOS 92).

There are numerous factors responsible for the existing circumstances. The present is somehow affected by the vestiges of the past. This theory of past-present is applicable in culture,

society, economy, politics and so on. "The contemporary condition and current debates are characterised by (renewed) forms of identity politics, be it based on gender, ethnicity, race, religion or the nation" (Qtd. in Baert 298).

Hegemony of culture is epenthetic in nature and parasitism is the mere outcome. In last few decades, there have been the dominance of Western culture all over the world and as a result a few of the insubstantial cultures are obviated outright. This practice is designated as cultural imperialism as well. According to Singer, "But one cannot argue that the religious faith of people of a different culture is false, while upholding a religious faith of one's own that rests on no firmer ground. That really would be cultural imperialism" (144).

The appraisal of any socio-cultural community is essential for all inclusive research. This analysis requires historical and theoretical framework to derive commending results. As Pramod K. Nayar says, ". . . all history writing is about interpreting the past for the sake of the present" (202). Though, there are numerous factors accounting for the study of a particular community, history is undeniably crucial for complete inferring. R. Wright Mills believes, "The image of any society is an historically specific image" (149).

Ideas and ideals promulgated by thinkers in the past and present assist in tackling contemporary problems. Hegel has been one of the extraordinary thinkers of his time and his ideas are relevant in contemporary scenario as well. His concept of history that development of consciousness towards freedom indicate potentialities of history in an idealised way and more over, paves means for rediscoveries. According to him, histories are of three types: "Original history", "Reflective history" and "Philosophic history" (3).

Likewise, Vassanji believes in unravelling of histories in order to understand the present in an enhanced approach. He believes that history is both real and created. In one of his

interviews with Shane Rhodes, Vassanji asserts, "History is a play between all of these different objects: the created and the creating, the real and the imagined" (113). Pursuing in the same vein, Amutha Charu Sheela discerns, "Histories of individuals, communities and nations fascinate Vassanji. He feels history helps the writer to liberate himself to write about the present and the past helps to create a space. Vassanji believes present can be understood better by unravelling the past" (118). A brief historical survey inspired by the works of Vassanji bestows brilliant consequences:

> History ought never to be confused with nostalgia. It is written not to revere the dead, but to inspire the living. It's our cultural bloodstream, the secret of who we are. And it tells us to let go of the past even as we honour it, to lament what ought to be lamented, to celebrate what should be celebrated. And if in the end, that history turns out to reveal itself as a patriot, then I think that neither Churchill or Orwell would have minded that that much, and as a matter of fact, neither do I. (qtd. in Groot 21)

The anecdotes embedded in M. G. Vassanji's novels render a contemporary insight with special focus on minority communities. This consequential penetration into the history and evolution of a less known community appends remarkable ideologies to the study of text. Inception of cultural studies from literary texts is progressive as Karniky rightly observes, "Just as the movement from self-contained text to material context often gets portrayed as liberatory, so does the purported movement from literary studies to cultural studies" (9).