Chapter III

A Conjectural Analysis of Ethnographic Patterns

Literary artifacts are endowed with intellections and denotations generating social response. There are signs and symbols embedded in those texts, which require unfolding of layers of meanings wrapped around them. Deciphering symbols is one of the best ways of interpreting literary texts. Sometimes, the symbols delineated in a literary framework can open up new avenues of cerebrating and bring to light the unexplored spheres. According to Barton and Hudson, a literary symbol designates "an object or a process that not only serves as an image itself but also refers to a concept or abstract idea that is important to the theme of a work" (191). One such method of cultural analysis is 'thick description', which, though not purely literary, is basically an anthropological mechanism.

'Thick Description' is an anthropological apparatus devised by Clifford Geertz to study human behaviour with reference to its context. He has used the term, 'Thick Description' in his *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973) to describe his means of ethnographic analysis. Ever since, the term has gained wide popularity and acceptance in anthropology based disciplines. Geertz deserves recognition for burgeoning reputation of anthropology as a multidisciplinary domain of which Nehring observes:

> By enjoining his colleagues to view culture as a literary critic might view a text, by referring them to cockfights and court records, rituals and royal progresses while emphasizing the value of interpretation over mere empirical observation, Geertz opened anthropology up to the humanities and the humanities upto anthropology. In fact, he rapidly became a higher prophet in English and history departments than he had ever been in his own land. Among his most vocal and

> influential admirers was Stephen Greenblatt, who imported his methods and temper into the study of Renaissance literature. (274)

Clifford Geertz has been an innovative anthropologist and a campaigner of symbolic anthropology. He has constructed a framework imparting primary consequence on symbols and emphasised on the role of symbols in conceiving civic connotations. His involvement in culture studies has been prolific and he believed that, "Understanding a people's culture exposes their normalness without reducing their particularity" (14). Geertz argues for a "semiotic" concept of culture:

> Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretative one in search of meaning. It is explication I am after, construing social expression on their surface enigmatical. (5)

Thick description involves more than literal depiction and meanings embedded under the contextual layers. It suggests the objective of an anthropologist—to retrieve meanings, to decipher symbols and protract all inclusive versions. The modus operandi employed is semiotic and symbolic with objects constituting cultural communication. It is synchronic, study of a particular society at a singular point of time. Its methods are classified as symbolic rather than scientific; it is, "not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning" (qtd in Watson 30).

Clifford Geertz, in his essay, "Thick Description," puts forth the argument that culture is a system of symbols. According to him, the analysis of a culture is semiotic and it calls forth a thorough interpretation of the signs. He suggests that a culture organism can be interpreted, "By

isolating its elements, specifying the internal relationships among those elements, and then characterizing the whole system in some general way - according to the core symbols around which it is organized, the underlying structures of which it is a surface expression, or the ideological principles upon which it is based" (17).

Geertz proposes an interpretative way for scrutinising a culture which is historically, economically and politically bound. He compares the method of the 'interpretive anthropologist' (who accepts a semiotic view of culture) with the method of the literary critic analysing a text:

> Analysis, then, is sorting out the structures of signification - what Ryle called established codes . . . determining their social ground or import. Doing ethnography is like trying to read (in the sense of 'construct a reading of) a manuscript - foreign, faded, full of ellipses, incoherencies, suspicious emendations, and tendentious commentaries, but written not in conventionalized graphs of sound but in transient examples of shaped behavior. (9)

Thick description renders a slice of culture and its ultimate object is to seek the way in which a cultural group thinks. Geertzian methods are a combination of history and semiotics, as they encompass both historical context and interpretation. As per his mode of analysing, time stands still and the particular cultural slice thickens over years of archival research. Geertz ascribes few characteristics to thick description, "So, there are three characteristics of ethnographic description: it is interpretive; what it is interpretive of is the flow of social discourse; and the interpreting involved consists in trying to rescue the 'said' of such discourse from its perishing occasions and fix it in perusable terms." He acknowledges "microscopic" as the fourth characteristic (20-21).

The process of construal requires both a sense of logic and a faculty of imagination. The interpretative anthropology, however, assists in harnessing syllogisms and imaginations. Geertz believes, "Cultural analysis is (or should be) guessing at meanings, assessing the guesses, and drawing explanatory conclusions from the better guesses, not discovering the Continent of Meaning and mapping out its bodiless landscape" (19).

Thick description shares some similarities with anecdotes as well for analysing the multi-layered culture systems. "The Touch of the Real," which appeared in *Representations* journal and in *Practicing New Historicism* elucidates the internalisation of anthropology into literary criticism, particularly new historical practice. Stephen Greenblatt, in *Practicing New Historicism,* excogitates the design of Clifford Geertz's 'Thick Description' in compartmentalising and assembling paradigms constituting a specific culture. "He argued that our interpretive strategies provided key means for understanding the complex symbolic systems and life patterns that anthropologists

studied" (20-21).

The office of thick description is clear and vivid in "The Touch of Real," where Greenblatt introduces anthropological endowments in new historical practice. Clifford Geertz, being the pioneer of symbolic anthropology and originator of thick description contributes an important component to the new historical interpretation. Consolidating the premises supplied by anthropologists in general and Geertz in particular, Greenblatt resolves, "there is rather less observation and considerably more explication - explication de texte - than anthropologists generally admit to" (23).

Greenblatt draws distinctive parallels between thick description and thin description in order to intensify the connotation of the former. He alludes to Geertz's logical disparity, "How

could the distinction between 'thin description' and 'thick description' (the one merely describing the mute act, the other giving the act its place in a network of framing intentions and cultural meanings) be linked . . . ?" (21). This sharply drawn demarcation concretises the fundamentals of thick description.

The kernel activity of thick description being multiplication of resource from available source by means of interpretation, calls forth socio-cultural exposition. Geertz puts it this way, "In the study of culture the signifiers are not symptoms or clusters of symptoms, but symbolic acts or clusters of symbolic acts, and the aim is not therapy but the analysis of social discourse" (26.). This unique dimension of ethnographic reading synchronise various streams of perspicacities. Moreover, Geertz asserts, "The point for now is only that ethnography is thick description" (Geertz 9).

In order to render a symbolic reading of a particular event or a certain object synchronically, material scrutiny of a culture espouses that culture's events and actions; ceremonies and observances; rituals and values; relics and artifacts. The Shamsi community delineated in Vassanji's story bound territory is a socio-cultural community travelling through geographical space and time line. A cultural analysis of this unique community can be attempted by means of thick description, a mechanism recommended in symbolic anthropology.

Vassanji's Shamsi community, by and large, modelled on Khoja community and particularly Khoja Nizari Ismaili community manifests attributes of socio-cultural antique tradition. Therefore, a parallel reading of the travelogue, *A Place Within: Rediscovering India* rendering Khoja community, supplements the scrutiny of this fictional socio-cultural Shamsi community.

M. G. Vassanji's memoir, *A Place Within: Rediscovering India* is his distinct work furnishing details on his genealogical antecedents in general and Khoja community in particular. In fact, it is the exclusive work of Vassanji which insinuates the traces of his imaginary community in Khojas of Khatiwar. Despite the fact that there are very few individuals representing Khoja community limned in the memoir, the ruminations succeeding and preceding Vassanji's visit to Gujarat saturate records on this community.

Hailing from legendary lores, the community epitomises the consequences of migratory and transitional phase of life in historical context. The socio-cultural and religious habits of Shamsis germinate multifarious perspectives rendering a microscopic observation of subsisting minority community.

The community's identity which is synchronised with the passage of time, nevertheless celebrates its imposing and legendary origin. Arun P. Mukherjee observes, "The Shamsis are very well knit through ties of kinship and religion" (87). It has its own traditions, folk lores, convictions, history and language, "Look. We are a community, with a history, language, identity"(*Amriika* 141). As the community hailed from Northwest part of India Gujarati can be deduced as the community's language. Moreover, it has a history punctuated with international measures and antique rituals.

Living together in social and cultural groups has been a healthy practice of social living from time immemorial. The people of this particular community live in communal clusters promoting economic, social and spiritual solidity. The minority dimension, unfamiliar and foster abodes can be counted as principal factors encouraging group living among Shamsis. This pattern has been in vogue in East Africa, North America and in India as well. This comportment of group living is a catalyst for their intact, integrity, solidarity, conservation and sustenance.

Dhanji Govindji's arrival is facilitated by the Shamsis who are already settled in East Africa. Likewise, there are others who have come to Tanzania and other Eastern African countries patronised by their kinsfolk already stationed. One of the most encouraging and productive end products of the Shamsis' transmigration is that it emphasised the importance of family networks. Whilst the community had always had powerful family ties, it is family networks, both immediate and extended, that allow them to survive and thrive in East Africa. Regarding family ties, Ramcharan's observation is worth mentioning here, "The strength of the family provides practical and emotional support to the individual and, in terms of the hostility shown to them by members of the society, it provides them with the means for psychological adjustment to their new society" (39). Moreover, the integrity and organisation of the community relies on the resourcefulness of their leader, the mukhi.

A mukhi is a religious, social and all—round leader presiding the domestic and public affairs of Indians settled in the relevant terrain. He is accosted like a fulcrum harmonising the activities of their community and the one who constructs room for new arrivals, "There was a mukhi wherever there were a few Shamsis. And the mukhi would put you up; he would introduce you to the others of the community and he would show you the ropes" (TGS 12).

A mukhi is elected on the basis of familiarity of circumstance and geographical circumference; experience of trade; economic and social influence. The mukhiship is not hereditary as after Raghavji Devraj, Dhanji Govindji becomes the mukhi of Matamu and not Devraj's sons. The mukhi of this community suggests the necessity of a leader to monitor and channelise socio-cultural and religious activities of a communal group. Raghavji Devraj, Dhanji Govindji and Meghji of *The Gunny Sack*; Abdul Jamal Duji and Jaffer of *The Book of Secrets* are some of the mukhis limned in Vassanji's novels.

Nevertheless, there are leaders in the vein of mukhis delineated in other novels: Sona, a religious leader of Shamsi community in America and Tejpal of Pir Baag imparting regulations and assistance to their people. Sona in *Amriika* acts as a religious leader organising spiritual meetings and prayer gatherings for his community people in America. Likewise, Tejpal, one of the Gadivaras of Pir Baag, besides representing the religious shrines of Pir Bawa, obliquely pilots the spiritual lives of those who believe in the command of Gadivaras.

The office of a mukhi in a Shamsi communal group appears to be manifold and inevitable. Besides being a religious leader, a mukhi is in charge of some other socio-cultural facets of individuals and their family. He is a panjandrum and 'every one's man' at the same time. To be precise, a mukhi is an all-round leader of a group of individuals and as a matter of fact, his role becomes the most important. Ramji in *Amriika* illustrates the manifold personality of a mukhi, "In front, facing everyone else - ten people on a good day - sits Sona, the mukhi: presider. It's a family tradition, he says, his grandfather was a mukhi too. There is a mukhi in every town, village, and city in the world where there is a Shamsi; he is an honorary consul, so to speak, an American Express office, traveller's aid, keeper of the flame" (28).

However, the mukhi system exists no longer in India as a corollary to the attrition of the community's roots owing to the overflow of advancing shifts. There are more or less, no references for community mukhis in contemporary India in the fictional narratives except Vassanji's memoir alluding to a very few of mukhis who hardly render the idea of a vibrant mukhiship. Besides, Tejpal of Pir Baag, representing the Gadivaras fulfils the spiritual obligation of mukhi.

Vassanji in his very opening fictional speculation acknowledges the evaporation of mukhi system from India. The mukhi system is worldwide but hardly any more in India. The

place of origin has been abandoned by the community members for various reasons. "There is still a mukhi wherever there are a few Shamsis. There is a mukhi in London, in Singapore, in Toronto. There is still a mukhi in Matamu, but there is no longer a mukhi in Junapur (history has seen to that)" (TGS 11).

Mapping of the imaginary territories rendered in Vassanji's fictional works underscore the idiosyncrasies of this singular community. These dominions are exclusive habitations of Shamsi people focusing their inter and intra social demeanours. Somehow, supplying topographical essentials for ethnographic probing: as Low states, "Increasingly, however, anthropologists have begun to shift their perspective to foregrounding spatial dimensions of culture rather than treating them as background, so that the notion that all behavior is located in and constructed of space has taken on new meaning" (Low 1).

Besides, providing geographical milieu to the community, these terrains constitute cultural space. Matamu of *The Gunny Sack*; Kikono of *The Book of Secrets*; Rosecliffe Park of *No New Land* and Pir Baag of *The Assassin's Song* are imaginary lands rendering exclusive social life of this community. The topography of these geographical terrains corresponds with the socio-cultural composition of this community.

The ecesis of communal cluster of Shamsi community in East Africa evolves from a solitary family unit and grows into a full-fledged social order. The community circle widened as and when other families joined in protracting the circumference. As the narration of The Book of the Secrets puts in the picture, "It was said, with some truth, that opens one Indian duka, or shop, in the middle of nowhere and soon you'd have a row of dukas, in the same way as a potato or yam proliferates. . . . So the first duka appeared, so the town grew" (26).

The sense of belonging to some one and some society is another factor underlining the aggrouping nature of the community. In addition, the fear of unfamiliar and unknown in a foreign land prompts individuals to clasp one another and eventually constitutes a crew on their interminable journey. Pipa, who is detached from his communal roots, decides to adopt a foster clan as he knows, "As he had learned in Dar, you had to belong somewhere, have a people." Moreover, Pipa's episode evokes the idea that Shamsi community embraces and adopts fellow Asians without convictions: "It was a small community and it embraced them warmly" (TBOS 140).

The Shamsis, who take cover under the counsel of mukhi in East Africa, pursue more or less the same mukhi system in Canada and elsewhere in the world after their second migration. Lalanis, after settling in Toronto, visit their community mosque and the mukhi to be acknowledged, "At the mosque a mukhi sat presiding from under a basketball ring. Here after prayers the newcomers announced themselves . . ." (NNL 68). In addition to this, when the Lalanis and others sense impending disintegration of their value system, the presence of Missionary, their religious leader in Dar-es-Salaam is called forth to guarantee their social friction.

The formation of communal clusters accelerates the growth of brotherhood and social suavity. The Asians in general and Shamsis in particular constitute socio-cultural group and live intact: as Rocio G. Davis asserts, "For the South Asians in Africa, the sustaining of the communal cocoon becomes a strategy for survival in a foreign land" (143). The Don Mill neighbourhood crowded with Asians renders communal terrain where people disseminate their ethos and barter congenial purviews. Lalanis receive attention and assistance during an interpolated social gathering. They are tricked into a social get-together and coerced to pay their

complements in terms of currency. However, they are rescued from this exploitation as a fellow-Shamsi man, being a lawyer soliciting their cause.

Community solidarity governs the social standards and obligations to each other among themselves. The episode of subway station in *No New Land* resonates the strong bond among the individuals of this community and their inherent unity. Esmail's humiliation by racist fellow Canadians brings down on him emotional and physical injury which receive panoptic sympathies and special attention of his community folks. A conclave moderating mass mourning and communal ruminations closely follow the incident:

> There were people from all the neighbourhood buildings, some thirty in number. How had they all heard in such a short time? The sofa and chairs had been moved to the walls and were all occupied. More people sat on the floor. They looked like mourners gathered in the first hours after news of death - with uneasy sighs and subdued murmurs and sympathetic glances towards the next of kin, the sister sitting in a prominent place, distraught and tearful, flanked by solicitous relations. (NNL 102)

Potentialities of community solidarity and unassailable camaraderie achieve spectacular effects. The cause of Esmail erupts lava of conflict from a volcanic demonstration against racist attitudes, "There followed a rally the likes of which Don Mills had never seen. Several hundred people - including children - of all backgrounds, smiling, chanting, carrying provocative placards: ESMAIL WE ARE WITH YOU, NO TO APARTHEID, LET MY PEOPLE COME"(NNL 110).

The cause of brotherhood and communal interest surpass all convictions. In *Amriika*, Ramji's perverse act of rendering refuge to Michel which is a product of chance and deception

somehow substantiates the inevitable bond of communal brotherhood. Ramji's situation of harbouring a fugitive implicates Michel's opportunistic ploy and Ramji's weakness for communal bond with him. Once, certain of Michel's crime, Ramji attempts to avert his interest from him, however, he oscillates between communal duty and civic responsibility:

> An appeal from a compatriot, a Community member; we were brought up to believe we are all brothers and sisters, we stand by each other. We come from the same neighbourhood, went to the same school and the same mosque . . . rows of fidgety boys sitting together on the floor, and a monitor minding you — how can you forget. You could end up losing your faith, but you would never really abandon a brother. Give him a place to stay in an hour of need? Surely this was the right thing to do. (*Amriika* 330)

Names of persons have been undeniably one of the symptoms of civilisation, interactional convenience and culture sophistication. The name of a person is the fundamental identity tag which, besides recommending recognition suggests an individual's ethnic and cultural background. Somehow, the names of the Shamsi individuals bestow impressions suggesting probabilities. The names imply sometimes Islam, occasionally Hinduism and more than often a mixture of both religious affiliations.

In *The Gunny Sack*, the protagonist's name is Salim, whilst, his great grand father's name is Dhanji Govindji; in *Amriika*, the name of Ramji's son is Rahim; and thus there are many names in Shamsi community derived from Islamic and Hindu names. Ramdeen is another name standing for integrated Islamic beliefs and Hindu mythology. These names suggest secular beliefs of Shamsi and their bond with their Hindu ancestry.

Some of the names bear resemblance to holy deities particularly Lord Vishnu. The Shamsis, ardent worshippers of Vishnu, devote their names to him as a mark of reverence. Dhanji Govindji, Karsan alias Krishna Fazal, Ramji, and some other names draw references to Lord Krishna's name. Karsan in *The Assassin's Song* contemplates his name relating to duty of a son towards his mother, "Like Yashoda: to whom her beloved Krishna, her Karsan - our names were the same - could do no wrong" (246).

Further, the names supplement conjectural comprehension of the community's archival record. It is perceptible that the names of the Shamsis correspond to the progressive demeanour of the community as well. Salim contemplates the female names of his community in general and Zainab's name in particular cogitating the shift of time which has impinged on his community's movement:

> Zainab! What young, pretty Shamsi girl has an ancient name like that? We had progressed to . . . . Yasmin, Shamim, yes, flowers . . . . Nur Jahan, the light of the world. But Zainab . . . Lateef, Kutub, Faruq, we left these archaisms a long time ago how could I have missed? Where was the Karim, the Amin, the Alnoor? The names should have told me (and the beards, yes!) but blindly I walked in, into a nest of not Shamsis but rivals. (TGS 251)

The names are undoubtedly of Gujarati origin or leastwise, the names of the first generation Shamsi immigrants in East Africa. Vassanji in *A Place Within: Rediscovering India* cogitates, "Our family names - ending typically with the sound ani - indicate our origins in the Lohana and Bhatia castes of western Gujarat and Kutch" (250). Samji, Nanji, Lalji and few others are the surnames carried by the Gujarati immigrants to their foster homeland. However, these surnames undergo change and Gujarati cognomens are eventually surrogated by Arabic and

African names. Eventually, the family names are subjected to absolute transformation leaving no trace of their being and more over, slackening grip over genealogical trail. The clubbing and mutation of names become the underlying characteristic of Shamsi names:

> Dhanji Govindji. How much lies buried in a name . . . Dhan, wealth; Govind, the cowherd butter-thief gopi-seducer, dark Krishna. A name as Banya in its aspiration for wealth as Hindu; yet gloriously, unabashedly, Muslim. For the esoteric sect of the Shamsis there was no difference. But Govindji, the elders will now tell you, is not a family name - where is the attak, the last name, that can pin you down to your caste, your village, your trade? Absent, dropped by those to whom neither caste nor ancestral village mattered any longer. Later this irksome Govindji too was dropped by one branch of the family and replaced with Hasham. Whence Hasham, an Arab clan name? (TGS 11)

Food habit constituting one of the most wholesome components of a culture requires a scrupulous scrutiny of it in order to supply a complete socio-cultural analysis. It has been an essential parameter appraising the social development diachronically. In fact, types of food and eating habits differ world wide as per geographical domains and cultural nuances. Likewise, the food habits of Shamsi community represent unique attributes of its people and cultural system.

The Shamsi relish Gujarati guazine as their traditional food. However, their migration to East Africa and later to North America brings in perceptible changes in their food habits. Immigrants from India bring along their food habits across continents and living in groups, they find their native food practice affordable. Their food relies on the availability of rations as well. The first generation Indians arriving on African coast accustomed to wheat, rice and green

vegetables in no time adapt to the African staple foods. In addition to their wheat and rice, they take coco yams and other African crops.

The translated food habits of Shamsis define a typical characteristic of a minority culture which is silhouetted against imposing global standards. The impact of geographical movement is clearly visible in the changing food habits. The advent of East African gradation is conspicuous in Shamsi food gastronomy after their geographical interface with East Africa. Likewise, the sway of American cuisine on Shamsi food becomes inevitable in the late decades of the twentieth century and hence forth. Therefore, diversity changes the food routine of Shamsis. The get together of Shamsi friends in America convene food festivities, an amalgamation of Zanzibari and Gujarati catering:

> They loved to cook together, elaborately: something traditionally Zanzibari - a rice bread and coconut-based curry with cilantro, green chillies, and ginger, or a vegetarian Gujarati thali with an assortment of greens and daals elaborately served with pickles on gleaming aluminum trays, or a lush saffroned biryani or pilau, or goat trotters, or brain fried in the richest spices. (*Amriika* 284)

African cuisine has an imposing influence over the Shamsis who muster souvenirs through their course and fortify their mores. The Shamsis fluent in the African recipes relish cooking and eating it. In spite of their Americanised lifestyle in the contemporary and Indianised origin, they do not elude their past in Africa. In *Amriika*, Ramji, after substantial span of living in America, nonetheless, remembers and glorifies a typical African cuisine, mbaazi:

> To start with, a whole coconut, split, the meat scraped off and squeezed for the milk. The onions chopped very fine; the white pigeon peas boiled and the creamy sauce prepared using crushed green chillies, coriander, smidgins of turmeric,

> garlic. That was mbaazi. Then the fried bread, from the yeasty dough prepared beforehand, some days earlier. *Mbaazi na maandazi*, Zanzibaris swore by it, at least the older ones, those not corrupted by the baseness of greasy chicken and chips, which, as Darcy said, had corrupted the cuisine back home. (382)

The Islamic concept of halal and haraam food is abided by the Shamsis. Halal defines food which is permissible to consume and haraam is forbidden rations. The Shamsis are very conscious of their conviction and succeed in availing Halal meat amidst the metropolis of Canada, "You can buy halal meat now, from Ram Deen, an Asian man from the Caribbean" (NNL 62).

Shamsi community, basically being Indians, relishes their Indian food habits. Moreover, as they imbibe Islamic ways, they repel from pork and wine. Nurdin Lalani rebuffs from the idea of eating sausages which are perhaps made up of pork. However, once he eats it, he is unable to reconcile with his conscience. He feels guilty and begins to think that he is morally degenerating. The habitants of Rosecliffe Park render an assorted and multiple sapidities characterising the multi-cultural ambiance of India. Food is one of the most relished routines of the Shamsis and their spicy aroma kindles the aura:

> The cookers at Sixty-nine are on, full blast. Saucepans are bubbling, chappatis nest warmly under cloth covers, rice lies dormant and waiting. Whatever one thinks of the smells, it must be conceded that the inhabitants of Sixty-nine eat well. Chappatis and rice, vegetable, potato, and meat curries cooked the Goan, Madrasi, Hyderabadi, Guja-rati, and Punjabi ways, channa the Caribbean way, fou-fou the West African way. Enough to make a connoisseur out of a resident, but a connoisseur of smells only because each group clings jealously to its own

> cuisine. And the experienced can tell, sniffing the air in the lobby, what Gulshan Bai's tiffin is today, for the sixth floor is a popular stop at this hour. So it is not unusual to find coming down in an elevator a well-dressed young couple looking stiffly in front, holding baby, baby's diaper bag, and the local version of a bundle that a Gujarati peasant might carry: a plastic bag around several plastic containers. Gulshan Bai's tiffin travels far. (NNL 65)

However, it is apparent that food habits have under gone slight modification as well. The Indian families, besides savouring Samosas and other Indian snacks, appreciate chips, burgers and so on. Especially, the younger generation is attracted towards trendy sustenance and modern food habits. Romesh enjoys sausages, wine and other non-Indian food and encourages Nurdin to adhere to the same.

Clothes being one of the basic amenities of living are substantive gesture of all cultures as well. Dressing pattern of a particular community or a geographical expanse facilitates in defining their culture nuances. The Shamsi bestowed upon them the garbs which produced the subtlety of Indianness. The years closely following the arrival of Indians in East Africa or to be more precise, the first generation of them, preferred Indian apparels. The blood stained muslin shirt as a relic of Ji Bai's gunny sack articulates personal histories of Dhanji Govindji's family. Likewise, the attire of Shamsi characters tends to give insight into their culture.

Dress making is one of the Shamsi trades, though not a very prominent one. There are dressmakers and tailors in the community supplying Shamsi garbs. In *The Gunny Sack*, Salim's mother, Kulsum owns a fancy store specialising in apparels. One discernible fact is the colour of wedding dress of Shamsis which is unusual from customary Islamic wedding colours. Mariamu

wears green colour for her wedding, whereas, Maroon is clad in a white dress which is associated with widowhood in India.

The introduction of African apparel in Shamsi community is conspicuously obvious on account of some factors: proximity of native neighbourhood, availability, expediency toward change and adopting regional idiosyncrasies. Consequently, Kofias, Pachedis and Kanzus, which are typical African apparels replace the Indian dresses and become integral, "It was an occasion for kofias and kanzus, turbans, frocks, and pachedis" (TBOS 44).

The East African ambiance in Vassanji's novel renders a culturally speckled expression. The multicultural array is composed of: the native African culture; the European coloniser's civilisation, to be more precise, English and German; the traditions comigrated with immigrants and particularly Indian. *The Book of Secrets* demonstrates that there is a visible discrepancy in their attires as well:

> There were flags, banners pledging allegiance, and two bands; Europeans -the men in white suits and sun-hats, the women in dresses and wide frilly hats - stood in front with the police; Africans in all manner of attire, kanzus, tattered trousers, buibui, khanga cloth, stood behind on one side; Indians in turbans and fezzes, suits, dhoties, and frock-pachedis, stood on another. (192)

The Shamsi men seeking their brides from native families can be considered as a factor bringing insome African modus vivendi. Khanam in *The Book of Secrets* is a Swaheli woman enjoying the most superior social status in Shamsi community. She is the wife of Kikono's mukhi. This modest lapse of intercommunity or international marriage paves way to an extended bond and gradual communal hybridity. Likewise, Rumina in *Amriika* representing racial

hybridism is partly African on account of her paternity and partly Shamsi from her maternal side. These dual communal identities in some way or other bring in changes in living protocols.

The dress code of the Shamsi has further discrimination on the degree of their religious sense. They split into smaller factions: fundamentalists, progressives and mystics. The fundamentlists believing in the modesty of women advocate head dress and veils, whereas, the progressives representing modernity and liberal shift cast off veils and head dress. In all likelihood, the Shamsis delineated in Vassanji's works appear to be progressive dismissing conformist ways of Islam and adapting congenial melioration. Dressing conventions of individuals show evidence of their ethnic and communal possessions:

> The feud in the community at the turn of the century, the murders in Bombay, the splintering of the Shamsis into Hindus and Muslims, progressives, fundamentalists and mystics: one of the sects was fundamentalist Sadiqi, with its dress code and the Prophet's beard, its imposed modesty for women. (Interestingly, the old photograph of Jena, the old man's wife, did not show her in veil: a convert?). (TGS 253)

However, the progressive Shamsis accommodative of modern ways of life, succumb to the influence of European culture. There is a notable transformation in the dressing comportments of Shamsis under the colonial rule. The impending independence from the colonial regime endorses liberal or rather modern ways amidst Shamsis and the effect is overwhelming on the younger generation. By and large, the metamorphosis in Shamsi ethos is manifested in the choice of apparels especially by the fair sex:

> And they all wore 'shortfrocks' - with hems that were a foot above the ground but already represented a revolution - and western styles and patterns and,

> significantly, without the head-covering or pachedi. In one fell swoop, the Shamsis decided - at least for their younger women - to do away with this remnant of purdah, with its various stylistic conventions for girls, married women, widows, women with unmarried daughters, women with married daughters. Meanwhile, in the streets, other women walked in buibuis, burkhas, saris, and pachedis; many still do. (TBOS 241)

This transformation tagged as modernism and Westernisation implant deep, the scars of occidentalised appeal all the more once the transmigration takes place. *Amriika* and *No New Land* supply contingents for cogitations on changing phase in everyday life. Zuli, Jamila and Rumina in *Amriika* accentuate this obtrusive alteration.

In addition, the apparels appear to be acting as an agent of national integration of the Shamsi community in the post-independence Africa. The Shamsi individuals in order to assimilate to the impendent aftermath of the African independence disgorge their semblance of British citizenship and slip into 'comme il faut' meaning (according with custom or propriety). This post-independence adoption of African trend helps the Indians testify their nationalistic felicity towards Africa, which is seen in *The Gunny Sack*, "Alu, Jogo and I started wearing kofias, which were taken from the unredeemed stock at A.A. Raghavji's pawn shop. Kulsum did not object too much, her father had worn a fez, and some old men from our community still wore them, and the neighbours said it's a good thing for the boys to integrate a little" (193).

Modification in physical attire is a noticeable characteristic in the course of acculturation. The younger generation of Shamsi community very quickly succumbs to the dominant trend and slips into Westernised apparels. In No New LandNurdin's daughter Fatima demonstrates the symptoms of this transformation, "She was dressed in designer blue jeans and a stylishly

oversized khaki shirt, and her hair was tied in two little clumps by means of bright red clips, enhancing the babyish cheeks" (4).

Somehow, the elder generation does not succeed in eluding this extreme sweep of transformation from modesty to modernity. Initially, the first generation Shamsis representing the Asians mildly protest against the display of glamour, exhibitionism and immodesty. Zera epitomising the spiritual and religious phase of Shamsi community is compelled to compromise with the impending change and yield to modifications:

> Happily for Nurdin, his wife, out of her sense of modesty, did not take to cutting her hair or wearing pants, as many other women started doing . . . . So there were homely women, who had always dressed in long frocks, suddenly emerging swinging immense hips clothed in brightly coloured acrylic pants, and you couldn't help looking and feeling ashamed at the same time. (NNL 67)

The weddings, being very important ceremonies in domestic and social life are celebrated with sumptuous ceremonies and abundant magnitude in all culture. It is not any different with Shamsis, they celebrate the occasion of wedding with utmost grandiosity accompanied with all rituals. In fact, the wedding ceremonies of the first generation Shamsis are very far-reaching geographically, profligately in time and elaborate in manner.

The exponentiation of wedding ceremony in case of first generation and second generation of Shamsi community is on account of receiving an Indian bride from India for a groom in East Africa. Dhanji Govindji in *The Gunny Sack* is expected to take his bride from India however, he does reach his destination and takes a bride on his way. Somehow, unlike the father, Dhanji Govindji's son, Gulam arrives in India seeking his match and marries Ji Bai. The wedding is performed twice or rather carried out in two instalments through passage of time and

distance. After arriving in Matamu, Ji Bai and Gulam are again ceremoniously blessed and wished by the community:

> They were welcomed by a band playing an Indian wedding tune on reed flutes, and the procession left for Dhanji Govindji's shop, stopping at the mosque on the way, for the bride and groom to bow their thanks. As they crossed the threshold of their home a shower of rice grain greeted them, waiting women broke into a geet, and the crunch of clay saucers under their feet wished them good luck. (TGS 23)

The Shamsis consecrate and legitimise their marriages with Nikaa, an Islamic blueprint. Mariamu's wedding corroborates this, "The Swahili sheikh read the nikaa in Arabic, and the bride and groom then signed the register. . . ." However, there are few Hindu rituals marking the auspiciousness of the occasion like decorating rangoli, "On the hard ground in front of them were geometric designs drawn earlier by the women using coloured flour, and beyond these auspicious markings the remaining guests sat facing the couple" (TBOS 85).

Inter-racial marriage between Africans and Shamsis is considered reprehensible and ignominious. In *The Gunny Sack*, Salim's relationship with Amina is condemned in Shamsi social circle; more over, it is interrupted from further moving towards matrimonial phase, "A whiff of African blood from the family tree would be like an Arctic blast, it would bring the mercury of social standing racing down to unacceptable levels" (171). Somehow, unlike censure bestowed on marriages between Asians and natives, the marriages between Europeans and Asians do not meet the same degree of severity. The engagement of Rehman with Jenny, an European girl is lightly recognized and does not secure much disparagement. However, like most of the socio-cultural changes accompanying the second migration to North America, marriages do undergo slight transformation and inter-racial marriages become ineluctable.

Widow / widower remarriage is affordable and this opportunity is presented irrespective of gender in the Shamsi community. Women remarrying in their widowhood are as likely as men remarrying. In *The Gunny Sack,* Moti is given away as bride for the second time by her own in-laws by first marriage. After the death of Huseni, she marries Ranjan with utter social endorsement and deference. In *The Book of Secrets*, Pipa is encouraged to remarry and he remarries Remti after the death of Mariamu.

Vassanji aggregates the merits of marriage as a social institution and its role in the community through the contemplations of Pipa on his prospect of getting married. This social phenomenon of matrimony encapsulates further social prospects explicitly like communal respect, security and support from the community, "Marriage put a successful end to youth: the religion proclaimed that, the community acknowledged that. With marriage you were finally accepted: the women came and talked to you, called you 'bhai' -brother - and men treated you as one of them" (TBOS 142).

Festivals and social celebrations are indispensable for the importunate subsistence of a culture. Festive occasions marked on social almanacs punctuate the social life of individuals with exuberance, sanguinity and occasion to relish. Shamsi inheritance of Indian culture stippled with native and European ethnic nuances and noticeably swayed by hegemony of Western culture allows the community individuals considerable allowance of festivals. However, the festivals are more Indianised than influenced by other ethnic systems.

The cadence of Shamsi festivals espoused with the rhythmic dance and music in order to elevate the delectation is one of the most adopted festive gestures. Alfred Corbin in *The Book of Secrets* records one such festive occasion in his diary, "Eight men dancing round a tent pole,

each with an eighteen-inch stick in his right hand, the left holding onto a long red or green ribbon which descended from the top of the pole" (41-42).

Likewise, garba dance is another typical celebratory aspect of Shamsis. It underscores the initiation of Shamsi faith and the dance is a commemoration, "The garba enacted the first conversions of the community from Hinduism, several centuries ago in Gujarat, he was told" (42). This dance marked with sanctity and merriment is referred to by another name, 'Dandia\ "The 'happiness' was at its zenith, the last rounds of the dandia stick-dance were being played in a crescendo towards their finale" (258).

The Shamsis esteem the inheritance of their community and pay special homage to the initiation of their faith; nevertheless, they rejoice in all Indian festivals. The founding of Shamsi faith in India is regarded as grand and this occasion is commemorated with absolute splendour, "The occasion was the October 'happiness' to celebrate the community's founding in India" (TBOS 144).

Though, the Shamsis observe Islamic festivals, they contribute to the festivities of their Hindu neighbours as well. It is palpable that Eid and Diwali receive analogous and enthusiastic reception among the community individuals. There is no discernible hint to Ramzan fasting, however, Eid celebrations and food offering on Eid is furnished among the assorted accounts.

The celebration of community festival is vividly rendered in *The Book of Secrets* on both, rural and urban scale. The common festival in Kikono is observed with the congregation of community individuals from its vicinity some of them arriving from far away places to honour the event. The convoy of community kinsfolk is treated with paramount affability and dance, music and feast embellishing the occasion. Whilst, in the sophisticated aura of Dar-es-Salaam,

the occasion is celebrated for four entire days accompanied by picnics, stage performance, parade and other ceremonious activities:

> The 'happiness' began on the first day with a flag-raising ceremony at nine A.M. to the strains of the Shamsi anthem played by the scouts. Then came a semblance of a guard of honour formed by all of Baden-Powell's troops -the scouts, guides, cubs, and brownies - in the manner of the KAR but with a few loose feet; and then the march-past throughout the Shamsi area surrounding the mosque, the band blaring ' Swanee River' and strains of Sousa, followed close on its heels by boys and the town's idlers and beggars. (247)

There are various inexplicable and unique rituals conjoining the festive ceremonies of Shamsi community. Stepping on auspicious clay saucers during wedding ceremonies is one such custom observed in the community's celebrations in Dar-es-Salaam. In The Gunny Sack, this is observed during Maroon's wedding. The festival ceremonies furnished in *The Book of Secrets* display other rituals as well, "Older women supported brass pots of sweet milk on the heads of younger, unmarried women and girls. They walked in a long file through the crowds, to where the mukhi and other elders, in robes and turbans, would receive them and give each girl a shilling"(259).

Festive junctures of Shamsis are influenced by religious solemnisations and the arrival of Pirs as well. Births, memorials and weddings of Pirs are observed with utmost solemnity in Shamsi community. Sometimes, there are fairs which are referred as 'Melas' gracing the occasion of a holy man's visit or any sort of festive event in Dargahs. The arrival of Suleman Pir in *The Gunny Sack* represents a Shamsi congregation which invokes the blessing of the holy man

whereas, in *The Book of Secret*, his death engenders anguish among Shamsis who mourn his death for forty days:

> For forty days the warren-like streets in the town - Kichwele to Ingles, Ring to Acacia - hummed with a chant, a prayer sung with one voice, occasionally reverberating with a wail for the person who had advised them on everything, from what was a good thing to eat for breakfast to the hazards of too much tea-drinking, from throwing away the burkha-veil to adopting English in schools, and then to more arcane matters such as the ascendancy after the Prophet. (266)

Pir Baag hosts many festive events owing to the presence of numerous Dargahs and holy shrines encompassed in the vicinity. The Gadivaras who represent the Shamsi community take pride in their descent and venerate it on particular occasions with ceremonials. Such observances are machinated by communal efforts attentively and in a harmonious manner:

> At Pirbaag, the Saheb's birthday was always an occasion for thanksgiving and a restrained form of ritual celebration by the followers. The urs or death anniversary of Pir Bawa, celebrated as his wedding or union with the Universal Soul, was the greater festival. Visitors came dressed in new clothes and thronged the shrine, with much ceremony the Pir's grave was anointed like a bridegroom, and there was a communal meal. Ginans were sung into the early hours. (TAS 82)

The Shamsis in North Canada and America are attached to their traditions and rituals in spite of the embroiling sway of Westernised culture. The festivities and community celebrations are carried on with unaffected zeal and exhilaration. The effect of communal occasions is regulated by mukhi or community elders in order to preserve and venerate their spiritual and cultural ties.

There is a modest inclination towards the mores of their foster country as they in a loose way celebrate thanksgiving, Christmas parties, partly yielding to shifting current and partly due to social obligation, "Get away for Christmas . . . worst time in America - if you don't have anyone" (*Amriika* 48). Eventually, the second generation Shamsis ascertain the surrogating culture more affable. Nonetheless, they preserve their commemorations and in fact, in order to stabilise their vacillating faith seek the service of spiritual leaders. Analogous to the arrival of Pirs, the Arrival of Missionary in Canada is celebrated by all community members by convening meetings and attending spiritual discourses. Besides, assembling for spiritual congregations, the community people in Rosecliffe Park find an opportunity of social ceremonies accompanied with buffets and communal recreations.

Mythologies, legends and ritualistic gestures measure the antique underpinnings of a particular cultural system. Vassanji's ruminations are articulated through his characters, "Why do we need these ancient rituals in the first place, asked someone. . . ." For which Sona retorts, "He gave a calm disquisition on ritual as poetry and the need to retain mystery . . . " (*Amriika* 48). Shamsi community carrying Indian ancestry is a concoction of Sufism and Vaishnavism, embossed with African and European gradations and actuating Americanised curvature and thus becomes a composites system of beliefs. However, the Indian beliefs constituted by Iranian Sufism and Vaishnavism characterise a set of bilateral tenets.

Legends of Sufi Pirs and anecdotes from Hindu mythology comprise the oral and folk lore tradition of Shamsi community. The legendary biography of Nur Fazal running parallel to the narration of Karsan is one of its prototypes. The arrival of Nur Fazal and the miracles following it extol the imposing spiritual presence. There are numerous other accounts recapitulated and recollected by the Shamsis, "Once, it is said, in the villages around Bajupur, the

Prophet's favourite, Hazrat Ali, came to Gujarat on his horse Dul Dul, at a place which is thirty miles from Bajupur, and as proof of this blessed event, there is a hoof mark from the horse preserved in clay" (TGS 305).

Likewise, the Hindu legends of Sati and other apotheoses are related by the community individuals to retain their grip on righteousness, "'She was a sati, wasn't she?' the boy said, chattily. Pure and pious"(TBOS 219). The elders narrate stories from Mahabharata and other legendary tales to inculcate values and a sense of morality:

> Kulsum would have something for our edification, a story from the mythology. . . . How the five Pandava brothers, once having given their word to their mother to share everything, went on to share their wife. How Tara Rani would steal into the night to pray to her Lord against her husband's wishes, until one day he found her out and with sword in hand waited for her, only to see the evidence in her hand, the meat, turn into grapes and ladoos into oranges. (TGS 139)

Djins, evil spirits and diabolical allusions deliver a gothic subtlety to Shamsi beliefs. The terror of djin looms over the terrains of the naive converts and is visible among Shamsis owing to their Islamic beliefs, "And the mukhi quoted from the Moslem book in Arabic, then gave a translation: 'We created man from clay, and the djinn We created from fire'" (TBOS 70). It is believed that mbuyu tree is the abode of a djin and the tree itself is looked upon with dread during dusk, "The shetani resided in mbuyu trees" (TBOS 70). Kikono in *The Book of Secrets* and Matamu in *The Gunny Sack* accommodate such mbuyu dwelling djinnis:

> An eerie feeling descends upon the whole town as grey twilight, grim maghrab, approaches. Then the sun is behind the trees and the sea is dark -but not silent. It is a time that invokes fear in the young and inspires prayer from the old. Mbuyu

> trees abound in that area. And who doesn't know the mbuyu, the huge mbuyu with its shade like a cool room under the burning sun, but alas picked by solitary djinns, especially of the variety who like to pray, for their special abode? (TGS 47)

Magic portions, medicine man, djin possessed man and other mysterious therapists are crowded in Vassanji's Shamsi community stimulated by Africanised and Indian rituals. Dhanji Govindji of *The Gunny Sack*, seeks the help of a Makawi, an expert of Maji Maji ritual to facilitate his son's homecoming. Ramji's grandmother in *Amriika* is a kind of medicine woman healing the ailments of her community folks with prayers and orphic medicines. Kassim Kurji of Zanzibar in *The Gunny Sack* is considered as a connoisseur in communicating with djins, "He controlled numerous djins" (151).

Further, the treatment of jaundice with the assistance of needles is singular and seems effectual in *Amriika* and *The Gunny Sack*. Ji Bai surprises her audience by assuaging Sona's jaundice with needles and a bowl of water which she acknowledges as one of her inherited skills. In *Amriika* Ramji's grandmother, distinguished for her healing abilities treats jaundice patients, " . . . the woman running the needles along the sick limbs while muttering her prayers, then dropping them in the water. The needles, the water, would turn yellow over a few days, as the sickness and its telltale colour were drawn out of the body" (42).

Exorcism is another habitual modus operandi practised by exorcists and Maalims to expel evil spirits inhabiting human. Shamsi traders along with their commercial enterprise, undertake the vocation of exorcism too. Darcy recounts an anecdote attesting of his father's exorcist proficiency besides being a trader. Alfred Corbin's diary furnishes an entry narrating the episode of Mariamu's exorcism by a native Maalim which elaborates the sheer and irrational

ruthlessness, "She was seated on a stool, clutching at her hair with both hands, looking at the ground in sheer exhaustion. Her feet were bare, the clothes on her back shredded. She was being beaten. The old maalim, the exorcist, in kanzu and cap, stood over her glowering, a whipping branch in one hand, a tin box in the other" (TBOS 68).

Food offering in mosque is considered sanctimonious and a form of communication with the dead. Pipa offers food in his local mosque to appease the disquieted spirit of Mariamu visiting her husband in the dreams. Ramji after learning about the demise of his parents volunteers to take sweets to the mosque every Eid as a form of prayer to the departed. Likewise, Kulsum arranges for apples the favourite fruits of her late husband, to be given to the mosque in order to pacify her husband's soul, when his most cherished memento is shattered by the children. Moreover, there are special oblations to the shrine on particular occasions intending blessing for the dead ones in *The Book of Secrets,* "There were rituals to benefit the jiv on the morning of Eid, when the choicest cooking is taken to mosque in the name of the dead (food for the body transformed into prayers for the soul); and on Layl-tul-qadr, when angels descend upon the earth to bestow blessings" (208).

Language is categorically a socio-cultural artifact moulded by ethnic subtleties. It is irrefutably a means of communication, communicating cultural gestures as well. Vassanji proves to be a polyglot writer devising regionalised English in his narration. The narration is in English; nonetheless, the English is culturally and regionally manipulated.

Vassanji's assiduous undertaking of delineating a remote from roots incorporated in multi-layered social structure is inclusive with the rendering of linguistic patterns of the community. Andru Peek observes, "With reference to the feisty use of vocabulary from two non-

English languages in the novel (Swahili and Cutchi-Gujurati) the Author's Note emphasises that these are intended to be integral to the text though there is a Glossary for further assistance" (63).

Gujarati, Hindi, Urdu, Arabic words are strewn in the narration rendering an Indian Shamsi tenor while, African terms in general and Swaheli terms in particular employed in the narration supplementing the Africanised adaptation. *Amriika* set in Boston, California and Chicago endows the narration narrative architectonics with Americanised nuance. Code switching is the modus operandi adopted by the international immigrants and Shamsis for interacting in the consorted network. The numerous tongues empowering the community's trading and adapting skills is lucidly discernible in Vassanji's works.

The Gunny Sack facilitates the readers with a glossary of other language terminologies for better understanding of the readers as the narration is interspersed with them. There are abundant words from Swaheli, Hindi, Arabic, and Gujarati applied and to name a few; 'duriani,' a fruit much loved in Zanzibar; 'Baraka' quick; 'Jambo' how are you?; 'kanzu' a long garment of light cotton, usually white, worn by Muslim men; 'kamsa ishrin' from Arabic, meaning twenty five and used to denote the punishment of twenty five strokes of a whip; 'khanga' a colourful cloth worn by women to wrap around the body; usually has a proverb written on it as part of the design; 'kofia' a cap or hat; 'kwa heri' goodbye; 'manuari' from English man o'war; 'mbuyu' a baobab tree; 'mchawi' a witchdoctor, magician, etc.

The pidginised form of language fortifies the trading occupation of the Shamsis and their dealings with African neighbours in the vicinity. 'pili-pili-bizari' meaning spices is an exclusive Shamsi traders' nomenclature to denote a trade in spices. The Indians, initially, picked up Swaheli words and became eloquent in the language owing to political and social variations. In order to attest the integrity of Indian Shamsis with the independent Africans, community elders

and spokesmen deliver orations in Swaheli. Amina, an African activist eulogising the cultural and linguistic integration of Shamsi Indians says:

> Indians have been on the coast for centuries and they speak English- Amina attested, having come from abroad- quite differently from Indian Indians. There is a distinct Swaheli-ness to their English. And ask them, she exhorted, the Indian term for bakuli, or machungwa, or ndizi, and you'll catch them at a loss. As for their brand of Swahili: first, there are several brands, from the bad (Kuja-ne! or Kuja- to!) to the good- which if you want to hear, go and talk to Mama Ji-Ji opposite the market - and second, have you heard the Swahili the Africans speak in Nairobi (eti, kula maji! or: mutu mubaya!)? (TGS 281-82)

Further, the alloy of languages conveys the syncretised faith of the Shamsis in Pirs and Vishnu Avatars. There are words from Arabic, Sanskrit, Urdu, Gujarati and Hindi all together mapping the roots and ramifications of this community. 'eve of juma,' 'Shahada' 'Aulaad,' 'Niani' 'maghrab' and 'Vismillah' generating Islamic subtleness . Whilst, the expressions: 'sandhya' 'jiv' 'Bhagvan' 'guru ji' and 'dhan' alluding to Hindu nuances. There are other Indian and Gujarati lingos: 'moto divas,' chadar, bapu ji' 'mela' 'golis' and duka'catering to Indianness.

The second migration of Shamsi community to North America and the vocabulary of adaptation are appositely imbibed by the Shamsis. Similar to their social and cultural transformation, there is observable change in their linguistic behaviour as well. In fact, the language shift becomes mandatory for the individuals to fasten a professional and social position in Canadian society. Job seekers indulge in polishing and Canadising their accents to be qualified, "You try different accents, practise idioms . . ." (NNL 44). Whilst, the second generation of Shamsi immigrants acquires the shift effortlessly:

> One envies these children, these darlings of their mothers, objects of immigrant sacrifice and labour, who speak better-sounding if not better English: one envies them their memories when they are grown-up. Take this girl in hijab, standing in the elevator, head covered, ankles covered, a beautiful angular face, long body, who could have come straight from northern Pakistan. But when she opens her mouth, out flows impeccable Toronto English, indistinguishable from that of any other kid's, discussing what? - last night's hockey game. (NNL 63)

The Shamsis in America do not elude the sway of Americanised inflection either. Ramji's attachment with activists: Kate, Shawn and his American host family label an Americanised tenor, "Look, buddy . . ." (*Amriika* 71). The relationship between Ramji and Rumina built on the pretext of language renders some insight into Swaheli language. In order, to improve their intimacy, to underscore their common place of birth, they sometimes exchange Swaheli words. However, the community individuals speak Gujarati and Kutchi as their mother tongue regardless of their geographical aloofness. Vassanji in *A Place Within: Rediscovering India* attests this, "I am going to the state of my ancestors, Gujarat, where people speak a language I speak. How do I feel? On the train I strain my ears for Gujarati" (31).

Shamsi community recurrently cited as 'shop keeper' community or 'dukawallah' community owing to their absolute predilection for commerce, practice it as their staple occupation. In fact, the commercial motives allure and prompt the migration of Shamsis from India to East African coastal towns seeking affluent prospects. Coastal towns Zanzibar, Mombasa, and Dar-es-Salaam render accommodation for Indian traders and their aspirations, openings, and initiatives. According to Abdul Razak Gurnah, in *The Book of Secrets*, the Shamsi inhabit Kikono intending commercial prospects, "They are there because Kikono is on the border

between two colonies, between two railway lines, and therefore may possibly become a future centre of trade and exchange" (22).

Having trade as their basic occupation, the Shamsis espoused the opportunity of carrying out their mercenary stakes which turned out to be a wholesome practice. More or less, shop keeping is one of their hallmark traits as Vassanji says in *A Place Within: Rediscovering India*, "For Gujaratis, business is of overriding importance. I did not have to be told this in Baroda or Ahmedabad, this knowledge was part of my growing up, it was in the blood, so to speak" (271).

However, securing desirable positions in commercial terrain is challenging for the new Shamsi arrivals. Dhanji Govindji in *The Gunny Sack* encounters a bottleneck competition in commercial trade and amidst all well-established merchants recognise ample struggle and passable appeal to his enterprise, "But there was only one Sultan's customs collector; and the competition to get to the top was cut-throat" (10). The monopolising of market and positive rapport with natives and the superiors convened the efforts of a novice like Govindji who expertly regulates his commercial affairs, "Dhanji Govindji obtained goods from Mukhi Ragavji Devraj, the local agent for the firm of Amarsi Makan. He sold the copal to the mukhi at a commission. From this commission he paid back the mukhi for the goods and for his own groceries, and put aside a little savings kept in his name by the mukhi" (13).

The Shamsi traders undertake trade on different scales including: wholesale, retail trade and import / export in inter cities. The priority of their trading commodity relies on the local demand of the natives who constitute the major consumer populace of Shamsi shops. Moreover, the Shamsi trading zone situates itself in the reach of the potential customers. There are almost shops erected in all the imaginary premises of Vassanji: Dhanji Govindji's shop in Matamu;

Kulsum's fancy store in Dar-es-Salaam; Pipa store run by Pipa and Feroz; Haji Lalani's store in Dar-es-Salaam which furnishes a microscopic view of a Shamsi shop:

> The shop of Haji Lalani on Market Street in Dar became a landmark among the busy side streets of the Indian quarter: not for its size or location but because everyone had had occasion to find in it something or other no one else carried. It was the only place where one was guaranteed to find the button of choice, or thread or needle or buckle; it also carried soaps and shampoos, cough mixtures, tonics, vitamin compounds, tooth powders and pastes, laxatives and herb leaves - all from India and England. (NNL 15-16)

Besides, shops exclusive for African apparels and dress making comprise the trade. Kulsum's fancy store is exclusive owing to the merchandise sold and its keeper, a female with shop keeping skills. Kanga, Kikoi, loin cloth and buibuis, being popular garbs among the African females, take up substantial section in clothing shops. 'Pili-pili Bazarf referring to the trade of spices is another popular merchandising itinerary of Shamsis, "When news of the war came, Pipa had received the ADC'S permission to stay in town and run his pili-pili bizari business, selling kerosene and copra oil, spices and tobacco" (TBOS 121).

The traits of shop keeping appear to be an inherent legacy of Shamsis, "'Isn't it funny.' Jamila said, 'Whatever professions we studied for and practiced, we can't seem to stay away from business. It's in our blood . . . ?'" (*Amriika*183). In order to promote their trade, the Shamsis acquire native language and native etiquettes to fall in line with all inclusive traders. However, the Shamsis monopolise and manipulate the East African market without much jeopardy until the nationalisation policy of independent African nations.

Actions of community individuals and tralatitious beliefs articulating the socio-cultural mannerisms evolve the ethnographic study. Actions present social credentials and as Julian Murchison opines, "From the standpoint of ethnography, the only plausible way to study social and cultural phenomena is to study them in action (4). Similarly, systems of beliefs concretise an individual's thinking which eventually forms an integral part of the external parameters: as Bond observes, "Beliefs express the assessed relationship of association and causality among elements in the physical, psychological, social and spiritual universe" (40).

The religious idiosyncrasies of Shamsi community imply syncretised faith of Iranian Sufism and Vaishnavism. W. B. Pratima's observation concords, ". . . religion cannot be classified simply as Hinduism or Islam. It is an unprecedented amalgam of the two" (60). The prayers in mosque, Dargah and celebration of Eid; wonderfully synchronise with the devotional songs of Lord Vishnu, Holy Ganges water and citations from Gita and Upanishads. The manner of salutation, salaam and pranaam accentuate the syncretised beliefs as well, "Passing the mausoleum, with joined hands I would quickly say my pranaams and salaams to the Pir (TAS 34).

Prayers in early hours of morning are a habitual formal procedure among the Shamsis and it is ascertained from Corbin's observations as well, "Upon inquiring later in the morning, I was told that the Indian Shamsis wake up at 4 A.M. to pray!" (TBOS 34). The awakening to the call of eternal is considered revered for the faithfuls and an individual or some individuals undertake the task of awakening the other community folks for morning prayers. An example can be cited from *The Gunny Sack*, "A little before four, Jogo's father approached, limping on the street, calling on people to wake up and remember the Eternal . . ." (142).

Furthermore, there are some allusions to Shamsis praying two times a day - dawn and dusk. *The Book of Secrets* and *Amriika* have passing references justifying the above drawn supposition. Ramji in *Amriika* informs his American hosts about the prayer timings of the Shamsis, "Every morning when I wake up, and at night before going to bed. Actually the times are dawn and dusk . . . but that's not convenient here . . ." (56).

The Shamsi prayers are communal and observed in clusters. Meditation in the early morning is one of Shamsis' praying gestures invoking consecrated power, "Then for a space of half an hour there would be silence - while they meditated . . ." (TBOS 53). The practice of meditation is a fortifying procedure devised to distil spiritual lives from illusion, "You see, my people have always believed in meditation, to escape from the illusion of the world, which we call maya" (*Amriika* 118). The recitation of Avatars of Lord Vishnu is an allied course of their praying manners as well, "One evening, just after the long prayer had begun, the one with the recitation of the avatars, the incarnations of God, the lamps inside the mosque flickered out" (TBOS 71).

The religious idiosyncrasies of the Khojas which characterise integrated values harner special focus. They believe in some of the Islamic teachings and nevertheless their convictions rely on the worship of Lord Vishnu. They conceive eleven avatars of Lord Vishnu and one of these Avatars is Prophet Mohammed, "It lists the avatars of Vishnu, starting with the fish, but there are eleven of them here instead of the usual ten. The tenth avatar, according to this list, is 'Muhammad dur rasoolilah', the Islamic prophet" (APWRI 259).

However, ginans are the primary paraphernalia representing the Shamsi religious practices and rudiments of their beliefs. Ginans written in old Gujarati and Sindhi are very important lineaments secernating the spiritual comportments of Shamsi community. The kernel

theme of these ginans is invocation of spiritual love and especially encomiums on avatars of Vishnu. These are verses authored by Pirs and great religious leaders in Gujarati and Kutchi language, "The ginans, according to their signature lines and according to tradition, were written for their followers by a line of pirs, whose ancestry was Persian Ismaili but who, except for the first one or two, were all born in India" (APWRI 250).

These Sufi songs eulogising the avatars of Vishnu are emblematic of the syncretic convictions. This paraphernalia with concentrated universal spirituality and diluted orthodoxy supply a salubrious way for promoting religious tolerance. The ginans comprising prayers, are sung memorised by children as curriculum and excogitated by thinkers. These simple, poetic songs multiply good values in the community and more over, inspire many of them to initiate into a forbearing countenance. However, the essence of ginans consolidates the substance of mystic and Bhakti auras:

> Everyday, we went to a prayer house, called the Khano, where we sat on mats and sang at least two hymns, called Ginans, in an archaic language that was mostly an old Gujarati, but sometimes Sindhi. We did not always completely understand these ginans, but we knew they were beautiful; they defined our spiritual life and sensibilities. Many of them were about personal salvation of a mystical sort, or about Krishna-devotion, similar in content to the bhajans of the more famous Mira or Kabir, or those of any number of India's devotional saints. (APWRI 250)

Seeking forgiveness is another spiritual gesture of the Shamsis, as they believe in committing seven sins on quotidian basis, though unintentionally. Mukhi acting as a spiritual mentor attends to his community individuals, "Remember what they teach in mosque. Everyone,

no matter how pure, commits at least seven sins a day. That is the nature of life. That is why every day in mosque we go to the mukhi and ask for forgiveness" (TBOS 220).

According to the Shamsi belief, the universal truth is that there is only one God, though the ways to demystify the mysticism is diverse. They rely on the prognostication that their saviour will come from the West. Nur Fazal, prototyped on the path finder of Shamsi faith delivers discourses encompassing the precepts and principles of this mystic faith. He instructs sevenfold path 'satpanth' to his followers to elude the illusory macrocosm:

> Through that path he had brought them Kashi and Mecca; he had bathed them in the Ganges; he had given them the key to escaping the cycle of 8,400,000 repeated rebirths into this unhappy world. In the Kali Yuga, the path of righteousness was a hard one, he told them. But he was leaving them the ginans to sing and learn from, and he was leaving behind his successor, Ginanpal. (TAS 199)

Nur Fazal's teachings modelled on the spiritual precepts of Bhakti and Sufi moments in India compose the kernel of the Shamsis' beliefs. Poornima in her review of *The Assassin's Song* comments, "Nur Fazal's teachings about the Atmaan, the Holy Spirit, is not founded in any one religion but instead freely borrows from both the mystical Sufi branch of Islam and Hinduism."

Reading from Gita and Upanishads interlaced with mystic teachings assemble the spiritual vitrine of the Shamsis. Upanishads supplying secular spirituality serve as basis for Shamsis, "Understand yourself. You are the truth. Tat tvam asi, say the 'Upanishads.'" (TAS 223). In addition, the syncretic beliefs of Shamsis are exhibited in their holy benediction which is constituted by Ganges water and a sweet dessert, 'halwa' which is known as 'sukhreet. This practice of holy water from Ganges and 'sukhreet' travels far and persists in America as well,

"After the singing, everybody stood up and queued to take the holy water of the Ganges, as it was deemed, and the prasad, the familiar sweet sooji halwa" (TAS 298).

The mass prayers of Shamsis are conducted by a mukhi in mosques and prayer halls. Women and men congregate communally for prayer at a hall referred as Khano. Vassanji describes one in his memoir, "The khano is modest - a grey concrete square block of a place" (APWRI 33). Dargahs and graves of Sufi saints constitute holy pilgrimage of Khojas. Vassanji alludes to a number of Dargahs in Gujarat: to name a few, Imanshah Dargah and Darbar Sahib Dargah.

The role of religious missionary is imperative in the Shamsi communities, especially, the one embarked on passages remote from origin. Stability of spiritual devotion and superintendence of religious customs abroad require attendance of vigilance and guidance. Gulam in *The Gunny Sack* and Missionary in the *No New Land* represent such religious services orchestrated for the upkeep of the community.

The Shamsis are very ardent adherents of their faith and keep it perennial through religious instructors. Nevertheless, their beliefs are prone to necessary changes in due course of time, "What you've got, we've got too, only more modern. We change with the times" (NNL 50). Missionary represents religious integrity of the community. His arguments, ideas and elocutions divulge religious convictions of Shamsi community. The sway of Missionary's teachings is lucidly pertinent through Zera, who like her master circulates her understanding of the religion. The Shamsis in spite of their influx into a Westernised world and retarded settlement, keep fast their communal ties with religious reverence.

Above all, the syncretic faith of Khojas underscoring a synthesis of Islam and Hinduism distinguish them from other all-inclusive religions. However, Vassanji ascertains resemblances

of Khoja ideals in Sikh beliefs and draw parallels between these two sects, "The Sikh religion is a blend of Islam and Hinduism. . . . It is said that when a young Guru Nanak reappeared after a mystical experience which lasted three days, during which he saw God, the first words he uttered were, 'There is no Hindu and there is no Muslim'" (APWRI 176).

Vassanji's works scrupulously present a macrocosm conciliating a marginalised and minority community. The cultural foibles of this community closely pursue the core plot lines which is more often than not an amalgamation of public and personal histories. Arun P. Mukherjee appreciating Vassanji's expertise in cultural elucidation comments, "Vassanji fills in these details with the precision of an anthropologist" (64). From the very debut novel, *The Gunny Sack* and till the latest memoir, Vassanji's terrain lies in the enterprises of a particular community which is referred as Shamsi in almost all his works except *The Assassin's Song* and *A Place Within: Rediscovering India*. However, the community based in *The Assassin's Song* replicates all social patterns and religious beliefs of Shamsis excluding the East African familiarity. In fact, the legendary tale of NurFazal running parallel to the protagonist's narration suggests the inception and initiation of the Shamsi faith. Likewise, *A Place Within: Rediscovering India*, a travelogue rummaging the ancestral history of the author renders Khoja community upon which the fictional Shamsi community is cloned.

Culture of a particular minority community hardly meets due acknowledgment and the individuals of such unheeded culture endure a sense of insignificance. This underscores the thematic framework of Vassanji's novels. Ray Deonandand, in his review on *The Book of Secrets* notes, "The evolution of community is an important theme in the book. The perseverance of Arab-Indian culture and the preservation of its community's central tenets despite geo-political

tumult and commercial forces of change are binding strings kept strong and taught in Vassanji's thematic web."

Culture, an integral part of an individual's identity is one of the most apposite catalysts required for bridging the gulf between crudity and placid beauty. Besides, encompassing beliefs, communal patterns, religious customs and social habits, the recreational and cultural idiosyncrasies endow artistic fluency in life. A review in the *Telegraph* reads, "Most of all, the novel recognises that a cultural or religious inheritance is not a birthright; it must be practiced, like a song or a prayer, if it is to refine the crudeness of the world into beauty." Karim H. Karim identifies culture as:

> There are several parallel ways in which the word 'culture' is understood. It is often thought of in terms of the behaviour of 'high' or 'elite' classes of society than in terms of 'folk' or 'popular' culture of the masses. However, the word alternatively refers to the totality of the ways of life of a people, including their ideas and habits which they share and transmit from one generation to another.

Moreover, it can be appreciated as an apparatus of ratifying cultural epitomes: as Bennett reckons, " . . . it also informed the practices of a new set of cultural institutions which aimed to combat the shortcomings of civilization by diffusing the higher standards of culture throughout society" (66).

Cultural transformation has been a recent and frequent phenomena in diaspora literature. The immigrants seeking refuge in foster abodes are the chief agents of accelerating cultural changes in foster society as well as their own community. However, it is not that one slips into other's garb completely; nonetheless, it causes mutual smudging as the sway of foster culture penetrates the adopted one's and vice versa. Somehow, the impact of immigrant culture is similar

to any other counter culture and its charm on the host culture is comparatively less effectual. On the whole, immigration acts as a negotiator of cultural diluteness, as Narang says:

> The greater the cultural distance between the mother and the foster societies, the more difficult is the adjustment of riding a two-headed horse, providing cultural workers unique opportunities of constructing complex patch-work quilts. Through a unique dialectical twist, the immigrants while bending over backwards to adapt themselves to their new cultural landscapes are in the process changing the cartographies of the recipient societies significantly - and permanently. (42)

It is worthwhile to make a note of what Phillips says in this regard, "Multiculturalism considers itself the route to a more tolerant and inclusive society because it recognises that there is a diversity of cultures, and rejects the assimilation of these into the cultural traditions of the dominant group" (14). The recent and most dissertated phenomenon of multiculturalism is engrafted in the migrational itinerary of the Shamsi community. *No New Land* establishes the mosaic of multicultural Canada and *Amriika* brings into picture America's cultural montage composed of numerous ethnicities.

The Shamsi communities limned on the imaginary canvas, under different contexts and in different geographical emplacements bestow assorted fluency in socio-cultural regulations. This portfolio of diverse experiences juxtaposed with quotidian schedule assists in analysing and inferring the cultural patterns of this community. The study of single molecule facilitates analysis of entire molecular genetics. In the same vein, the scrutiny of an individual and a few individuals contribute to the analysis of an intact social system. According to Daniel Miller:

> In this context, the study of the individual seems reduced to that of the microcosm that exemplifies the macrocosm, or alternatively the dualism that is society. We

> see the individual as exemplifying the precise position he or she holds in society and reproducing at this scale the same sense of order and expectation we recognize as that of the society as a whole. A person is his or her place in the overall picture, as is appropriate to his or her categorization, for example by gender or class. Almost as though they each generate and reproduce some larger societal DNA or cultural code. (5-6)

A direct interpersonal interaction with few community individuals of Nizari Ismaili Khoja community coincide with the above furnished conjectural analysis of the fictional Shamsi community. The Nizari Ismaili Khojas pray three times a day, once in the morning and two times in the evening alongside one hour meditation. They celebrate Eid, ceremonies of Imams, Prophet's birthday and Navroz on twenty first of March of every year. The prayer text is in Gujarati language and ginans comprise the paraphernalia of their spiritual routine as well. However, there are some deviations in their beliefs and a notable shift from Vaishnava faith to Islamic comportments.

Besides these postulation and factual contingents, there are a some other aspects which craft the delineation more comprehensively. There have been substantial variations in the approach and lifestyle of the Nizari Ismaili Khojas. This has been owing to their inclination towards change and ideals of progress. Education and progressive ideas towards modernity play an imperative role in shaping and reshaping spiritual and communal doctrines.

To sum up, the application of thick description technique yields dynamic and wholesome results by indulging in the dichotomy of classification and generalisation. This procedure involves: procuring data by means of inquiries in individuals' lives; and then, filtering the

oddities, leaving behind the generalised sediment which eventually supply the socio-cultural idiosyncrasies of Shamsi community.