An acute consciousness of, and concern about, the past and its possible recovery in memory pervades the work of Moyez Vassanji, with his narratives “probing into the past to account for a present that is increasingly chaotic,” but also reaching out from the present to make sense of a past whose nature in narrative is under continual formation.¹ The burdens under whose weight the writing labors are the troubled milieux of colonial and post-colonial modernity, both of which are marked by powerful metanarratives of history.² Since Vassanji attempts a recuperation of the past to provide new ways of seeing the Indian diaspora of East Africa, his narratives are positioned against versions of the past in these inherited categories of history. This act of revision is propelled by, among others, what he seems to regard as the congealing of the diaspora’s history by colonial and anti-colonial discourses in ways that are inimical to the Indian diaspora. His fiction acknowledges the importance of a continuous conversation between past and present, as a way of challenging the kind of reification of history alluded to above. Vassanji invokes the past to provide foundational narratives from whose vantage point the diasporic subject of his fiction can rise above the seeming muddle of the present. Nonetheless, the past depicted in these writings is not merely a stable contrast to cultural fragmentation in the present, delving as he does into the problem of writing history and the vexed nature of memory itself. In a sense, therefore, he both disavows and recognizes the importance of remembering. As he indicates in one of his interviews, there is a case “both for and against digging up [the] past.”³

Vassanji’s fiction occupies a unique place in East African writing for it self-consciously reflects upon the nature of history both as an immanent category and as a textual process. This is not to suggest that other writers from the region have not written literature with historical themes, but that very few of them have come to write in the mode known as metafiction, which Patricia Waugh names as “fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality.”⁴ Charles
Sarvan has noted that The Gunny Sack “implicitly questions the validity and value of what it records and therefore, itself” (511), a self-reflexivity that is also evident in Vassanji’s other texts. Vassanji’s fiction generally takes an oppositional stance to the idea that it is possible to write a correct history, hence opening up the field to what he considers a necessary scepticism about truth-claims and openness to the various possible ways of imagining history.

It is this see-saw movement between the affirmation of memory and its disavowal that this chapter examines, in order to explain the motives behind it and the consequences that it holds for Vassanji’s politics. Through a reading of The Book of Secrets and The Gunny Sack, I argue that, much as memory is a necessity for Vassanji and his Shamsi subjects, its value remains a highly contradictory one. On the one hand, the feeling of exile engendered by migrancy, colonialism and a hostile African nationalism provides the impetus for memory as an act of self-restitution. On the other hand, the recollection of unflattering moments in history, such as the involvement of the Indian diaspora in the slave trade and colonialism, makes memory a burden and thus frustrates the attempt at the establishment of foundational narratives. Faced with this riddle, Vassanji does not jettison historical referents altogether, but chooses instead a mode of narration that can lighten the weight of history while also making use of it. This consists in a careful balancing act between memory and its refutation, the result of which are texts that are both historical and apparently anti-historical. I wish to argue that Vassanji’s narratives embrace history because it is the site upon which diasporic desires can be realized, but also question it because it is already half another’s and thus shot through with meanings that frustrate the self’s desires. Moreover, much as this ironical relation to the past allows Vassanji to arrive at insights that a single-minded view of history might have repressed, I show that it also postpones many of the ethical questions that his works would otherwise have given a more salient treatment.

This chapter shows how Vassanji summons the plurality of memory, which consists in giving space to a myriad of voices, as a defence against the freezing of the past by any metanarratives. In essence, the central target in Vassanji’s deconstruction of history is the notion of totality, the attempt to grasp and explain history in one clean sweep as a single whole. However, all acts of memory are also acts of reduction and, ultimately, selection. Louis Mink, for instance, has argued that memory is a way of “grasping together in a single mental act things that are not experienced together, or even capable of being so experienced, because they are separated by time, space or logical kind. And the ability to do this is a necessary (although not a sufficient) condition of understanding.” What this means is that memory, however tentative and disordered, is always marked by an effort to grasp totality, to reduce the flux of history to a series of finite statements. It is an attempt to give coherence to events and occurrences that might not at first seem to