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A Diasporic Return to Tradition and Roots in M.G. Vassanji's *The Assassin's Song*

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The Assassin's Song fictionalizes Vassanji's return to his roots in India. Through the narrator protagonist's journey back to India from North America, an analysis has been done to assess the returnee migrant's obsession with a search for roots and identity through an exploration of history. In this novel Vassanji has used the religious history of the Sufi tradition and the contemporary political climate of India to find answers to the religious mayhem caused by the 2002 Gujarat violence. The conflict between past and present, tradition and modernity is reflected in the desertion of home, and an acceptance of a new place of shelter, which however, turns out to be only an illusory home. An attempt has been made in this paper to show how the search for home in *The Assassin's Song* continues until the conflict between past and present is laid to rest and the migrant returns to his origins and accepts his tradition as the *gaadi-varas* and *saheb* of the shrine of the Sufi Nur Fazal in Pirbaag, Gujarat.

The Assassin's Song is a very different novel from Vassanji's earlier works for it is his first novel to be set in India. For the first time, Vassanji has shifted his focus from East Africa and North America to the country of his community's origin in India. Though India is present in all of his works as the place from where the members of his fictional Shamsi community had migrated first to East Africa and later to North America, yet its appearance is mostly as a place of memory belonging to the past, and rarely as a site of narrative action. In that sense *The Assassin's Song* fictionalizes Vassanji's return to his roots and tries to answer the most pertinent question related to a diasporic existence, "Do we always end up where we really belong?"

The narrator protagonist, Karson Dargawalla, is the eldest son of the *saheb* of a famous Sufi shrine in Pirbaag of an ancient mystic Nur Fazal, who had arrived in India in the 13th century from the war-torn Central Asia. Pirbaag is located in the fictitious village of Haripir in the state of Gujarat. Karson is one among the line of descendants who were believed to be the *avatar* of the God. The *sahebs* of Pirbaag were the lords and caretakers of the shrine and were entrusted the task of being the spiritual advisors of the people who came in great numbers to the shrine to be blessed. It was believed that they were the descendants of the first follower of the Sufi when he arrived in the city of Patan Anulaara, which was then ruled by Raja Vishal Dev.

Sitting in his flat in the Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla, Karson is reminiscing about his childhood—his 11th birthday when his father took him on a walk and tried to explain him the mystery of the world and beyond the world—the mystery of the "Nothing": "What lies above the stars?" he asked . . . What lies beyond the sky? What do you see when you remove this dark speckled blanket covering our heads? Nothing? But what is nothing?" (1). The important lesson that Karson's father wanted his son to understand was that "There is no nothing... that everything is in the One . . ." (2). This sets up the philosophical tone of the novel. As is evident from these questions, the novel is steeped in the Indian cultural tradition of spiritualism and the philosophy of the Upanishads. The shrine in Pirbaag belongs

to neither Hindu, nor Muslim religions and at the same time to both, thus following a syncretic religious tradition with its faith “in the One”—the supreme God, the Brahma. Through delving deep into the history of India, its emphasis on plurality generated by the confluence of various cultures and religious traditions that it has absorbed since ancient times and particularly the history of the syncretic tradition at Pirbaag, Karson tries to find answers for the present carnage in Gujarat, the riots between Hindus and Muslims in which the shrine is destroyed by the religious fanatics and his father is murdered.

As successor to his father, Karson is to become the next *saheb* of Pirbaag and be the spiritual advisor to the people. The burden of this tradition lies heavy at his heart and never leaves him, even after his desperate attempts to escape his role as the *gaadi-varas*. Karson has no desire of becoming God. He wants to play cricket and live an “ordinary” life. Instead of having a life filled with paternal love, as he wishes for, Karson has a fear of being sacrificed by his father. Since the time he read the Old Testament, he is tormented by the thoughts of Isaac being sacrificed by Abraham. He feels that his own father will sacrifice him and his life in the service of his God. As he says:

And the one that touched me the most, kept me up late into the night, brooding—the story of the father, Abraham, who was willing to sacrifice his son, put him to the knife, for a calling . . . Didn’t Isaac matter?—I asked myself. No, because the call of the Almighty had come.

Isaac didn’t matter, I wrote in the back of my Bible, and underlined it firmly. *Son didn’t matter to father.* (102)

Karson asks, “The Saheb my father? Was I a sacrifice?” (102). Tied to a destiny, Karson contemplates the questions about his life and his future: “Who and what was I? What would my life be in the future? Would it include any fun or joy?” (172). Ultimately he tries to come to terms with what is his predetermined future, at least for the time being. However, the glimpses of the world outside provided to him by the old newspapers and magazines that the truck driver Raja Singh brought for him, induces a desire within him to be a part of that vibrant world which was so different from his life in Pirbaag. As time passes, Karson feels the stirrings of a new life calling him. Thus, Karson becomes a being of two worlds that simultaneously pull him in different directions. However, the appetite that he develops for knowledge of the world outside Pirbaag takes him on excursions to the city of Ahmedabad, to the bookstore of Mr. Hemani and finally to the prestigious Harvard University, despite his father’s fears and initial resistance.

From here begins a new phase in Karson’s life. He becomes finally free of the burden of his tradition and leaving off his special status becomes “one among many.” The Epigraph from Keats at the beginning of the chapter voices his feelings: “Then felt I like some watcher of the skies / When a new planet swims into his ken; / Or like stout Cortez—when with eagle eyes / He star’d at the Pacific . . .” (200). Coming to Harvard University, Karson realizes it was a far bigger world than Pirbaag, and there was lot to learn and absorb in that “city of knowledge.” Outside Pirbaag, Karson’s world-view broadens. The University provides him a vantage point from where he could observe his life in Haripir objectively. And when he questions himself, as well as his father, about his “special” status as the heir of the *gaadi-varas*, he finds the futility of the claims of their difference from the wider world and finally assesses, he was “not so very different!” (222) from others and adds, “Sometimes, I think, living in a small place like Haripir we tend to forget that the world out there is much bigger and there is nothing special about us. Or that all peoples are special in their own way. Or that

we are all the same’” (224). Karson’s presumed similarity between *us* and *them* reflects in his efforts to establish symmetry between the Metaphysical and Romantic poets and the *ginans* of the Sufi tradition. This comparison is based on the idea of cultural amalgamation and cultural hybridity, which as reflected in Karson’s approach is a sign of the migrant’s adaptation to the new culture.

Between the pull of tradition as manifested through his father’s warnings in his letters and the modern life of his present American abode, Karson chose the latter. He starts distancing himself from his past, pulling himself further away from his tradition and from the world of Pirbaag. When Premji, a man from his community, contacts Karson and takes him to a prayer meeting where other followers of the community were also present, their reverence towards him as the heir to the shrine of Pirbaag touches his soul, yet he feels suffocated by the treatment accorded to him (239). As Sreyashi Dastidar says, “Karson’s way of dealing with his pain is by wrenching himself away from the Pirbaag within him—a forced crisis of faith.” Karson stops socializing with people who may have any connections with the old world. His newly acquired intellectualism lends him an “outside” perspective that let him observe things in a more detached way, and accords him the ability to judge for himself and form opinions freely. This was the effect of knowledge upon Karson, and this was what his father always dreaded. As Karson says, “‘I had to come all the way to America to learn about myself.’ How true, how dangerous. This was exactly my father’s fear—that I would begin to see myself from an ‘outside’ perspective: a distorted, irrelevant image from the other end of the telescope” (225).

The process of acculturation has set in, and Karson suspects his father’s every move to be an effort in the direction of bringing the stray sheep back to its herd and keeping it chained for life. He, therefore, denies going back to India when his father informs him of his mother’s deteriorating health. The one-way ticket that his father has sent was taken by Karson as a trick to blackmail him to return to India and then never to go back. In a final act of severing all ties with the past, Karson, in a letter to his father denies the sahebship of Pirbaag. This was the end of his communication with his family. He cut off, or at least he thought he has cut off, all links with his earlier life with that declaration of his freedom.

However, past never liberates him from the guilt of his betrayal. Ironically, even after denying connections with his tradition, Karson’s field of specialization for his doctorate—“a mystical strain in English poetry” was inspired by his Indian background, the *ginans*, which were the “spirit” and “sensibility” of the world of his childhood. He eventually gets married to Marge, a girl of Indian and American background, fathers a son and settles in British Columbia. For the time being his happiness seems to be complete. However, he lives under constant pressure of losing all that he has. However he tries to leave the past behind, it follows him in unexpected ways. He was astonished to see his son so easily pick up the words and tones of the *ginans* which he “unthinkably” recited to him. His father’s voice rings clearly inside his mind as he feels he “was living an illusion,” “Maya the wily sorceress of the material world had bewitched” him, and he “had no right to be happy” (284). Karson tries hard to secure his happiness but could not. Tragedy strikes and his child dies in an accident and his marriage disintegrates.

After his own child’s death, Karson finds himself in a similar situation like that of his father, and now he could better understand the feelings of his father instigated because of his own desertion. Yet the fear of accepting the old tradition keeps him from reestablishing contacts with his father, or with anyone to whom he was known as the heir of the shrine. However, the past beckoned and this time Karson could not ignore its calling. The link

between the past and the present was reestablished through the sound of songs similar to the *ginans* of his childhood that leads him to the place where he meets an old devotee whom he had once reluctantly blessed during his visit with Premji to the prayer meeting. When Karson receives his father's letter imploring him to return to Pirbaag, he could not deny.

Thus, after thirty years of absence Karson returns to India. However, by the time he returns his father is murdered and the shrine is destroyed in the aftermath of 2002 communal riots in Gujarat. His brother Mansoor was on the run from the police. Though his crime never becomes clear, Karson has suspicions about his involvement with an Islamic militant group. He has changed his name from Mansoor to Omar and now has become a "proper Muslim" discarding the neither Hindu nor Muslim tradition of Pirbaag. According to Mansoor, in that charged up atmosphere of communal violence and destruction, it was necessary to take sides to protect oneself. To practice a syncretic tradition was no longer possible nor did he have any faith in it. Moreover, Mansoor blames his father for the sufferings of his mother. He tells Karson, "The Saheb wasn't the saint you thought he was" (315). His mother accused his father of "making lustful eyes at Shilpa" (344), who was a devotee and regularly came to the shrine and served the *Saheb*. The accusations prove him "too human," and devoid him of the aura surrounding his previous stature as the *saheb* of Pirbaag. The letter that Karson's father has left for him was also a kind of confession to his son for his past behaviour. In another incident during Karson's childhood, he saw his mother secretly oiling the lamp burning inside the shrine, which was supposed to be eternal. For Karson the world of religious faith, fuelled by mystery and magic, was dismantled by the discovery that the holy lamp was kept lit not by a miracle but by his mother's assistance. Similarly, the regression of his father from a God to an ordinary human being puts his religious authority and practice of his faith under question. Both these incidents have the effect of strengthening the skepticism of Karson's mind, making the past devoid of its mystery and hence more acceptable, sustaining his diasporic detachment. Thus, the novel draws a very fine line between the contrasting issues of skepticism and faith.

It is in his conversation with Mansoor and at his instigation that Karson remembers the words of the *bol*, thence reestablishing his connection with the past. *Bol* was the secret mantra of the *sahebs* that was passed from father to the son. It was believed that the Sufi himself whispered it in the ears of Ginanpal, the first *saheb*, just before his death. "In its syllables lay hidden the secret of his [Sufi's] identity" (321). Karson's remembering the *bol* becomes his real homecoming as he accepts his identity as the successor of his father.

As the local sorcerer warns in *The Magic of Saida*, "The past is a dangerous business" (113), yet it has to be revisited and reclaimed even if it is to pay back for the injustice committed by once absconding from it. For the people of his community Karson becomes the saviour from the west. They clean and rebuild the shrine for the new *saheb*. Likewise, Karson picks up the pieces of his lost tradition and his own fractured identity and tries to rebuild them through his narrative, which is compiled of his own past and the past of the Sufi tradition epitomized in the life of the Pir Nur Fazal. Through Karson's journey back to his tradition, Vassanji has tried to find out how the past affects the present. Pirbaag was once a peaceful place; its shrine the symbol of the syncretic tradition and religious harmony. The followers of both Hindu and Muslim religions visited the shrine and respected the *saheb* who himself was neither Hindu nor Muslim. However, now the communal violence of recent Gujarat riots has destroyed the peaceful abode. The syncretism has been rejected as unwanted "sufi-pufi" baggage even by Karson's brother, who in case of Karson's permanent absence was to become the next *gaadi-varas*. The times demanded clear boundaries between different ethnic communities, which was the only way to protect oneself. Those who were in-between

were the victims of both sides. Mansoor, therefore, rejects this in-between ness like his uncle once did by going to Pakistan to be a complete Muslim. Mansoor's perspective is different from what Karson observed as an outsider. Karson's long stay in America has provided him a detached outlook from where he can perceive things more objectively. His secular attitude helps him find answers for the present destruction and havoc played by two antagonistic communities opposing each other since the time of partition of India.

Karson's research leads him to Sufi Nur Fazal's first arrival in the ancient city of Patan in Gujarat in the thirteenth century and to his origins in Western Iran. From the stories that Karson had listened from his teacher Master-ji and his father, he completes the puzzle and the mystery surrounding the Sufi, and traces his real identity. He discovers that the Sufi was a member of the medieval Hashhashin Empire. Ironically, the founder of the peaceful shrine belonged to an empire that ruled through the practice of assassination of its enemies. The inferences were further strengthened by the time of Nur Fazal's arrival in India, which was shortly before the destruction of Assassin strongholds by the armies of the Mongol king Hulagu Khan. Thus, Karson also reveals the mystery of the novel's title that refers to the *ginans* of Nur Fazal. As Vassanji has himself described that "The song of the title refers to the centuries-old tradition of singing mystical devotional poetry at such shrines" ("Personal Notes"). Nevertheless, Karson's skepticism does not allow him to believe their validity as only a mystical longing for God. According to Karson, some of these songs were "pithy love poems" for a woman. He says, "I had preferred a woman in the picture: for whom else would he have written the words, *My body shudders out of desire for you?*" (357). Thus according to Karson's perception the poems narrate Nur Fazal's diasporic sense of loss and longing for a past life and a far off land from where he had migrated to India. In this way through his research, Karson demystifies the past.

Strict adherence to conservatism and traditionalism in following whether pure or syncretic beliefs is what the novel rejects. Karson's diasporic detachment and his distancing himself from any particular religion, unlike his brother, have an implicit suggestion that faith is not a matter of political affiliations, of drawing boundaries between us and them. It is a relationship between God and soul—*Tat Tvam Asi*—as his father used to instruct him, defined by a presence and not the lack of something which the other is. It resides in sameness (as Karson feels inside the Jama mosque) and not in difference and division (as Mansoor's religious beliefs). It is a kind of tethering of the soul that surrounds a person's being even miles away from the place of origin.

By insisting on tradition and roots, the novel problematizes the concept of home. What is home for a diasporic subject like Karson? As understood in the context of this novel, home is not only a physical space where one finds comfort and seclusion from an outside world, but also a psychological space of the mind. On that level, for Karson, is it home where he feels surrounded by happiness of a comfortable family life which though, as his conscience keeps hinting, is only superficial and surrounded by a void caused by a complete desertion of the past, or is it home where he finally arrives after the destruction of the world of illusory happiness. For someone like Karson, deeply rooted in a tradition, home becomes a space where conflict between past and present is laid to rest. Such a space is neither located in completely reverting back to one's tradition and old life, nor it is found in the realms of a modern world that compels to forsake all evidences of a past life. It rather lies in between these two extremes, in accepting an in-between space—neither completely rooted in tradition, nor completely free of it. Though Karson finds his answer in the rhetorical question that he asks himself, "Do we always end up where we really belong?" (364), and comes back to his roots, he is not the same Karson who had left India and his tradition to settle in America. He

has changed from the boy whose world was limited to the boundaries of Pirbaag to a man of middle age whose outlook has expanded during his sojourn in a larger world. His diasporic vision has accorded him a critical perspective which makes him see not just the surface history but also makes him explore the deep history lying beneath the surface, and search for roots, which sustain the various branches of factionalism and division. At the end of the novel he settles in Pirbaag and accepts the role that his tradition has demanded of him as the *saheb* of Pirbaag. The unquestioning spirit and blind faith of a religious follower is overshadowed by an enquiring mind and practicality—the legacy of his western abode. As Karson builds up a new place from the ruins to preserve the faith of an old tradition, “preaching peace is clearly one of the novel’s clearest secular—or moralistic—messages” (Cottier 59).

Karson’s unconventional approach leads him to demystify the shrine and the Sufi himself. He decides to “make every little item that has survived from the library open to the world. There will be no more secrets in Pirbaag” (366). Karson’s discovery of the Sufi’s past leads him to the discovery of his own identity as the inheritor of the tradition of the Sufi. He accepts his status as the keeper of the shrine and spiritual advisor to his people, thus fulfilling his father’s wish, though not as completely as his father wanted him to do. Karson says, “As I attend to these people, unable to disappoint, to pull my hand or sleeve away, as I listen in sympathy and utter a blessing, a part of me detaches and stands away, observing. Asking, Are you real?” (368). The novel, therefore, ends on an enigmatic note, where the future neither appears to be totally bleak and devoid of hope, nor is it optimistic, signalling a complete revival of what is already lost.

For Vassanji, the novel embraces many of the beliefs of his childhood and youth, especially the idea of a Sufi whose teachings inspired the community and whose songs were part of the traditional folklore. He writes about the ancestral mythical memory in his memoir *A Place Within*, “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. . . . They are Krishna devotees, whom he teaches to expect an incarnation of the god to come from the west. . . . Meanwhile, they continued worshipping their beloved Krishna.” He further adds, “That syncretism, a happy combination of mystical and devotional Hinduism and Islam, without a thought to internal contradictions or to the mainstream traditions, inevitably defined my relationship with India” (ix). This mythical memory informs Vassanji’s fiction and for him it establishes a connection with his ancestral homeland. Through his narrative in the present novel Vassanji, as he says, “accept[s] a condition . . . that of agglomerating all one’s experiences, not denying anything in the interest of ‘purity’ but always being vary of the purifiers—religious, national, or ethnic ‘fundamentalists’” and thus keep the flame of tolerance burning when tolerance and flexibility is everywhere in danger and is being forsaken in interest of purism. He further adds, “Life at the margins has its comforts, and in multiplicity there is creativity and acceptance” (Vassanji “Life” 120). Due to his multiple affiliations, Vassanji has been accepted as well as eulogized in African, Canadian, and Indian literary canons. The comforts of belonging everywhere and nowhere in particular, though questioned by the mainstream, provide a stance to the writer from where he can speak of similarities underlying the differences of various nationalistic and communal discourses, ultimately finding the solution in a transnational, cosmopolitan worldview that shuns off differences in an acceptance of multiplicity. The novel hints that the roots of the present lie in the past and it is time to move beyond boundaries of rigid divisions and dwell at the margins.

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