

## **Transnationalism and the Migrant Minds: The Journey of M.G Vassanji's Diasporic Consciousness**

***Ranjana Tripathi, (D.Phil.)***

Rajarshi Tandon Girls Degree College,  
University of Allahabad, Allahabad India

---

### **Abstract**

M.G Vassanji, himself an Indian diaspora, has depicted in his works the paradoxical situation of the immigrants laying emphasis on the socio-political concerns that have had an impact on the migrant minds. The national boundaries for the migrants become sometimes less real and more arbitrary because as they move from one space to another and from there to the next, they keep positioning some thing of the cultural ethos of that particular country in themselves. They are in search of stability, tormented by the marginalization and the growing feeling of rejection at each adopted homeland. This paper shall deal with the journey of the diasporic consciousness of M.G.Vassanji through a study of his works in chronological order. A reading of *The Gunny Sack*(1989),*No New Land*(1990), *Uhuru Street* (1990),*The Book of Secrets*,(1993), *Amrika*(2000), *The In Between World of Vikram Lall*(2003), *The Assassin's Song* (2007), *The Place Within*, *Rediscovering India*(2008) reveals a continuously evolving meaning of India –the land of his origin. This article shall focus on the changing paradigm of Vassanji from the outer to the inner world of the diaspora and also the relevance of India to Vassanji in the course of his writings. Political contexts play a significant role on Vassanji's story telling and artistic imagination. His works trace the history of the Indians who arrive in East Africa and each successive novel narrates their journey from one land to another through the changing times and political conditions. The early woks are a search for stability, for identity but as he proceeds he moves ahead of the earlier trauma and non-adaptability in the adopted homeland thus delineating his changing diasporic consciousness.

---

**Keywords:** Migration, marginalisation, diasporas homeland, trauma.

### **Introduction**

Moyez G. Vassanji was born in Nairobi, Kenya in 1950 and raised in Tanzania. His parents were a part of a wave of Indians who migrated to

Africa from the west coast of India in the colonial era. Vassanji studied at University of Nairobi, then shifted to the US to join Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He received his Doctorate in Nuclear Physics from the University of Pennsylvania. He worked at the Chalk River Atomic Power Station and then moved to Toronto in 1980. Vassanji has a vast array of cultural influences to draw from. He and his wife Nurjehan Aziz started *Toronto South Asian Review* in 1981 which continues today as *Toronto Review of Contemporary Writing Abroad*. He formerly took to writing as a career devoting to it all his time. In this paper I propose to view the journey of Vassanji's diasporic consciousness through a study of his novels in chronological order. A reading of *The Gunny Sack* (1989), *No New Land*(1990), *The Book of Secrets*,(1993), *Amriika*(2000), *The In Between World of Vikram Lall*(2003),and *The Assassin's Song* (2007), reveals a continuously evolving meaning of India –the land of his origin. Vassanji focuses on the situation of South Asians in East Africa, Canada and USA and examines how lives of people are affected by migration. The transnational and migrant nature of the protagonists of his novels brings them close to Vassanji himself. I shall first introduce my topic and then study the novels to understand the diasporic consciousness of Vassanji. To study the journey of Vassanji's diasporic consciousness I shall present an analysis of his novels throwing light on the relevant aspects of his fictional world.

## I.

M.G Vassanji, himself an Indian diaspora, has depicted in his works the paradoxical situation of the immigrants laying emphasis on the socio-political concerns that have had an impact on the migrant minds. The national boundaries for the migrants become sometimes less real and more arbitrary because as they move from one space to another and from there to the next, they keep positioning some thing of the cultural ethos of that particular country in themselves. They are in search for stability, tormented by the marginalization and the growing feeling of rejection at each adopted homeland. Vassanji's diasporic consciousness, has been directed by some major concerns namely, his identity, his responsibility towards his land of birth, marginalization, acculturation, migration, and the land of his origin. Strangely enough Vassanji is even today unable to situate himself as a writer and still questions his identity "Am I a Canadian Writer?" He is perturbed when questions like whom do you write for or who is your audiences are put to him. He feels that if he is a Canadian Writer his novels do not feature Canada and its people enough. He wonders who will remember him. Who will read him after he has sailed off into the sunset? And if he read at all, then where will his literature be placed? In a Canada where he still has to spell out his first name? Where he finds himself sputtering out in frustration,

or will there be a place for him in the land where he was born that has a special place in his heart, which he thinks has been relegated to the margins of this world but where he is seen as historically relevant? "These are frustrations of looking for a place to belong.... Are these three or five years after which one stands before a judge swears loyalty, and options a piece of paper, enough to produce a Canadian sensibility, a Canadian work of literatures? It is in those moments that I wonder if I have a home, as I thought I had...." These fears that grip the writer reflect the seriousness of the situation, the pang of pain that arises with what Vijay Mishra calls hyphenated identity-- Afro American, Afro Asian -- and Homi K Bhabha calls hybridity. Hybridity a crucial post colonial concept is the assertion of a shared post colonial condition. It explains the in betweenness of diasporas and refers to the creation of a third 'hybrid' species by the intermixing of two species. It means cross-cultural exchanges or transculturation. Diasporic writers inhabit the margins of two or more cultures/ nations/ societies. They occupy a borderline position and their continual existence of this nature makes their identity peripheral and marginal in what is called liminality. The diasporas write about marginality, interstitiality liminality and hybridity which they suffer in their daily lives and fictionalise them in their literary creations. According to Vijay Mishra, 'Diasporic communities are always hyphenated .... The hyphen is that which unified the vibrant social and cultural spaces occupied by diasporas in nation states. It also reminds us of the contaminated border, hybrid experience of diaspora people for whom an engineered return to a purist condition is a contradiction in terms because they returned to the quay their ships had gone' The works of Vassanji are so full of newness ,diversity , heterogeneity therefore interesting and creative, precisely because they reveal the consciousness of a hybrid, a hyphenated identity who is writing about hybrids who are continuously transforming and re- creating.

Vassanji draws on autobiographical material though he denies that he never hailed from within the walls of the immigrant ghetto described in his novels His protagonists have situational and cultural similarities .Both come across many cultures at the same time-the Shamsis(fictionalized form of Ismaili) , the Africans, the colonizers-- the English and Germans and finally the multicultural North America but the protagonists are rooted in their culture.Vassanji is a Ismaili " I was brought up in a community of Muslims who had been converted in medieval times but who quite unembarrassed kept many of their 'Hindu' beliefs and made sense of them" Ismailies are not frequently found in India but they are preserved in the culture of the diasporas.

When the artistic ability of a creative writer recedes to the margins and endures all the pain and anguish, his diasporic consciousness generates a

creative tension in the mind and this initiates his creative process. Derek Walcott delivering his Nobel Lecture in 1992 said 'Break a Vase, and the love that reassembles the fragments is stronger than the love which look its symmetry for granted when it was whole. The glue that first the piece is sealing off. its original shape. It is such a love that restoration shows its white scars.'

Vassanji's writings arise from a sense of responsibility towards the land where he was born and nurtured. This precisely is the reason of his writing fictionalized histories that stand at the intersection of politics, history and literature reflecting the collective consciousness of the migrant Indians race. His novels focus on situation not character. "Every time you hear of problems in that part of the world, and every time you feel that something should be done, you wonder what you have done, and realise that there is essentially a lack of coverage." In an interview to Chelva Kanaganakan he points out that his characters don't mean anything until they have a history but he says he does not see, nor want to give the impression of ,a simple, linear historical truth emerging. The pain of homelessness of not belonging has brought forth novels that continuously explore the migrant mind. Be it history, or this era of the new world order, of transnationalism, acuteness of pain is unchanged and unchangeable. The creative ability unable to endure the marginalisation, otherness, difference liminality, indulges in self analysis, recedes to the past, its roots searches the ground that is very much like him. To overcome the issues of racism, discrimination and political harassment he recreates his country links with it and culturally aligns with it. Homelessness and rootlessness are therefore causes of creativity. Preoccupation with ethnic identity is not only a symptom of evolution but serves as a corrective trend in historical evolution. Explaining the creative process of a diaspora writer Vijay Misra says "The act of displacement now makes diasporic subjects travellers on the move; their home land is a series of objects, fragments of narratives that they keep in their heads or in their suitcases. Like hawkers they can reconstitute their lives through the contents of their knapsack." Rushdie in this context says that diaspora writers 'are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt. But we do not look back, ... we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost, that we will in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind '

In the 1990s a new concept, transnationalism emerged in academic discourse. In a transnational community the migrants come from nation state, where they have lived for a relatively long time returning periodically, and at least part of the family do not quit for good. The members of a transnational community seek to acquire citizenship of their host land while

retaining that of their country of origin. The double affiliation is not only a question of facility but also a chosen way of life. However, there is not uprooting from the territory and society of origin nor trauma, as in the case of diasporas. Vassanji's novels correspond with this era. He therefore portrays characters whose sense of national allegiance has been watered down by multiple migrations. Globalisation seems to have transformed the world radically with an emergence of transnational community. In transnational communities there is not the complete uprooting or delinking as in case of diasporas. Diasporas, as depicted in Vassanji's fictional world in the era of globalization are better defined in terms of transnationalism networks with a dissolution of cultural and geographic borders. A recent study by Robin Cohen reveals that there are nine criteria to categorize diasporas. The first category includes those who have dispersed either by 'dispersal from an original homeland often traumatically, to two or more foreign regions... or expansion from the homeland in search of work, in pursuit of trade or to further colonial ambitions.' This refers to also to the ethnic group that have dispersed into foreign regions as part of a colonial venture. According to Fludernik, this second category of migration in search of work can perhaps be usefully divided into three very different groups: the colonial diaspora, and the old and new diaspora in Vijay Mishra's terminology permanent displacement through emigration is labeled old diaspora while the new, she says in contrast to Mishra (and more reasonably) has professional considerations the movement of individual professionals and their families to mostly anglophone industrial nations like the U.K. Canada and the USA. This links it with transnational diasporas. Diasporas may be transnational but all transnational communities may not be diaspora. Fludernik sees this type of new diaspora as a more recent version of labour movements across the globe and motivated by professional considerations- the movement of individual professional and their families to mostly Anglophone industrial nations. This is the type of diaspora represented in most recent South Asian fiction.

With change in the scenario there is a shift of the oppressor from the coloniser to the governments of multicultural countries like the U.S. and Canada. Acceptance of ethnic plurality does not guarantee socio-legal equality. Skin is the chief signifier of cultural and racial difference. Cheap labour is still the ground reality of the seemingly egalitarian reason. Krauter and Dani's observe that highest degree of discrimination is observed in employment and wages. The policy of multiculturalism was made to embrace all cultural differences. This is evident in the novels of Vassanji and a reading of the texts reveals that multiculturalism segregates the natives and the immigrants.

On going through the works of Vassanji his diasporic sensibility is clearly evident. The issues that concern him most are raised repeatedly and every time a new aspect comes to light. Though the books focus broadly on the situation of South Asians in East Africa, Canada and USA and examines how lives of people are affected by migration. yet they present new situations and it is as if one book leads to the next. His first novel *The Gunny Sack* is divided in to three parts Ji Bai, Kulsum and Amina. These three prominent women have a strong influence on the narrator Salim. The dominance of the women in Vassanji's first novel clearly shows that the socio-cultural history, about which he is consciously concerned, is tactfully framed by women, who though are part of a patriarchal society, a legacy of the land of origin, still are preservers of tradition and carriers of culture. The book focuses on four generations of Indian diaspora beginning with Dhanji Govindji who left native India and came to Zanzibar and Tanganika towards the close of the nineteenth century and ending with his great grand son Salim, the narrator, in the basement room of a hotel in the North America towards the close of the twentieth century. Gunny sack it self is a metaphor for the past- the treasured belongings of Ji Bai It contains the memories of the land of her birth- her home land which has always been alive in all that she does and says. It carries the belongings of Dhanji Govindji, her father-in-law. The books, what they contain is not known to her, nevertheless she values it as sacred, is very possessive about it and is sure that the past of Dhanji Govindji can be unveiled revealing the mystery of his life. She hands over the gunny sack to Salim, her step grandson as she finds him to be the rightful owner who would bring to light some day the past. He deserves it because he alone can value it and reveals the hidden histories of those who came from far off western coast of India to live a life of dignity and those business men in search of better opportunities and prospects. Ji Bai in the last days of her life revisits India- that has changed from the time she had left but was in her memory still the same.

Acculturation is a natural phenomenon and can be witnessed in all the novels of Vassanji. When migration occurs there is in the process of contact, accommodation and assimilation. According to Robert Park, as immigrants learn to accommodate the dominant group, a process of cultural assimilation ensues culminating in intermarriage and amalgamation This process is progressive and irreversible. According to Redcliff, Linton, and Herskovits acculturation occurs when groups of individuals from different cultures come into continuous contact with each other, and subsequently there are changes in the cultural pattern of either or both. Dhanji Govindji is a Hindu Indian name, Dhan meaning wealth and Govind is Lord Krishna. He is a Shamsi and has already dropped his last name signifying caste, village and trade. For those who settled in Africa caste nor ancestral village

mattered any longer. Later generations drop Govindji and adopt Hashan, name of an Arab clan changed names from Dhanji, Samji, (Hindu names) to Aisha and Faruq (muslims names).

The novel presents the relationship of the Indian men with the African slave women who worked for them. Before his marriage Dhanji lives with Bibi Tarantibu and has a half caste son, Huseni who is dark and therefore different. He grows up to be a wellbuilt powerful young man but is a loafer. When Dhanji gets married he no longer has any thing to do with Bibi Tarantibu. He does not allow Huseni to be associated with his mother. The friendship and alliance with Africans- Mshenzis invites uncontrolled rage from his father who says " You are descended from the solar race! What do you have to consort with slaves for?" The plight of the hybrids half caste in colonial era was worse than that of the migrants and the Africans They belonged to nowhere, the Indians did not readily accept them and the Africans did not have the power to speak for them. After his father's accusations Huseni was never heard from again. Dhanji searches him but is unable to find him and says to Ji Bai that Africa has taken him back. In post-independence era Vassanji shows the hybrids, even Salim who is one eighth African, as having an edge over the Indians.

In all the novels of Vassanji there is a reference to the relationship between the different races that lived together in Africa (except *The Assassin's Song*) alliances with different races and religions is never encouraged. Later in the novel when Sona, Salim's elder brother is leaving for American Kulsum, Salim's mother warns him, 'Don't marry a white girl.... Don't turn your back on your faith and your community. Don't forget your family.' ( ) Again when Salim thinks of marrying Amina, an African, was a fiery anti imperialist humanist steeped in colours of Marxist Leninist theory.,there is a strong opposition from Kulsum. Salim confessed that he could go to meet Amina when no one saw him 'But our world was pulling us apart.... For me it was simply to be doing the unthinkable; to be the subject of discussion for anyone in the community, from the precocious ten year old to the senile: she children, religion, the differences, its not easy, nothing to do with racism, of course... and what words did Dar say to her... to have fallen in love with one of the exploiter class a dukawallah, mere agents of the British, these oily slimy cowardly Asians, what future did they have...'( ) Kulsum eyed him suspiciously and did enough to prevent it. Amina was adamant and says that this was not the first time that it was happening . Ji Bai gets along well with Africans and is very fond of Amina and when Amina asks her what actually was she- Ji Bai replies 'Yes, I am Swahili ... and Indian and Arab... and European'. ( ) Through Ji Bai had seen many sharp turns in her life ,she is several times uprooted and settled at another place, but she never looks back to remember her several homes. Matamu,

Dar Es Salam. Surprisingly she never remembers her homes in Africa as she remembers India. At the fag end of her life she says she has to visit Bajupur. This comes as a surprise to everyone. Does it still exist? She wants to meet her sisters, their sons and daughters and to visit the Hazrat Ali Mela. On her visit to her home in India she puts both her hands against that beloved wall, goes closer to it and softly beats her head against it once, twice thrice and she weeps (106.) This conveys the feelings of all diasporas, their desire for their homeland which changes with time and is irretrievable, the kith and kin are no more and those of the next generation do not have the same feelings.

After the independence Salim's family is several times raised to the ground left with almost nothing in hand, had to move to another place. This unsettling and resettling gives a transnational character to the Indian diaspora that belonged to no where, that lived in Africa for a more secure life than at home but really achieved nothing. Rushing from one place to another they look towards the west North America, Canada or Europe. They are desolate. *The Gunny Sack* ends looking forward towards a bright future. Salim says,

The running must stop now, Amina. The cycle of escape and rebirth, uprooting and regeneration must cease in me. Let this be the last runaway, returned, with one last, quixotic dream. Yes, perhaps here lies redemption, a faith in the future, and even it means for now to embrace the banal present, to pick up the pieces of our wounded selves our wounded dreams, and pretend they are still intact, we had our dreams, and it came to us this world. it worked us and we are thanked to dreamt was enough and so dream... ( )

The book throws light on the interpersonal relations of the migrant Indians and Africans in the colonial and the postcolonial era. The writer almost explains the circumstances under which the young Indians had to leave Africa. As mentioned earlier the writers own reasons and justification for leaving Africa lies embedded in the book. This being his first novel it went back in time tracing the history and presenting what may be called a clarification for his own movement from East Africa to the US and the to Canada.

Nurdin Lalani, the immigrant in *No New Land* survives amidst the hostility this struggle is a classic example of the existential tent that struggle affirms life. The novel explores the illusion of a 'Canandian haven' and the subsequent delusion on facing the stark reality. Nurdin however does not accept defeat in the face of discrimination. The book focuses on Nurdin and his family and also explores the marginalisation faced by his fellow immigrants. The book presents a mosaic of immigrant community and their response to cultural and geographical translocation.

Escaping the post- independence nationalistic eagerness of African who call the Asians, the exploiters of land, Nurdin experienced an ordeal on

his way to Canada as he was viewed by the immigration officers as ‘a pack of skilled and are rehearsed actors from the former colonies out to steal jobs from hard working English men and women. (34) His passport is stamped ‘deter future attempted crests.’ (34). Canada receives him on a welcoming note. The multicultural land with sectional brought prospects was not easy to establish oneself. His attempts of seeking jobs are annulled he is either overqualified or without Canadian experience and he is reduced to a menial. Multiculturalism is called multivulturalism in *No New Land*. (54) It promotes the discrimination that it seeks to eradicate. Racism is rudely visible in the charges of rape against Nurdin by a white girl who in distress was being helped by Nurdin. ‘Madan-miss is any thing wrong? Can I be of any help.’ (178) His hand is still on her shoulder when she cries ‘Rape!’ This episode alienates him even with his wife and children. Eventually Lalami bears to adjust concluding. ‘And with the pact before you, all around you, you lake on the future more evenly matched’. (207). He belongs to nowhere Nanji The college professor at a function explains the paradox of Multiculturalism. He believes, the immigrant has not choice, ‘but to become westernised which is what we have applied for by coming here.’ (77) Esmail is brutally wounded by a young woman which is helplessly viewed by Nanji, the professor ‘Where have we come what are we becoming?’ (97) The incident transports Esmail to Dar where he becomes an artist. Vassanji here comments, ‘While those immigrant Toronto’s poets and artist have periodic jubilees in the streets not, out of context, their roots out in the cold- irrelevant to the world, any world, marginal’. (164) According to Vera Alexander, the protagonist is forced with a double problem of how to manage his integration into a new culture and how cope with his ambitions One the other, he has a responsibility towards his community, whose reactions to the new situation often differ from his personal ones. Torn between allegiances to the past, present and future, the novel's protagonist takes some seven years to really cross the threshold to the 'new land.’

*The Book of Secrets* is a story of search for stability, for identity amidst displacement in the times of shifting borders and the emergence of an new world. Its time span is from 1913 to 1988, pre war Africa which is followed by the World War I between the German and British colonisers in Africa. It centres on the relationship of colonisers with the early diasporas from India and records the suffering of these non native servants of the British faced when they. withdraw *The Book of Secrets* is carved out by Pices Fernandes, a Goanese School teachers who has access to a diary mysteriously misplaced by Alfred Corbin a Governor of East Africa reveals truths of the social reality which would have otherwise been in the dark for ever. In the World War the sufferers were the natives and the Indians. ‘When two elephants fight ,the grass is the sufferer.’ The first section closes with the

arrival of the war while British controlled Kenya, Germany controlled Tanganyika and are time and again forcefully have to be a part of the war. The book unfolds the story of an Indian diaspora Pipa throwing light on the social customs, inter personal relations between the Africans and the Indian migrants of those with in the community and those. with the colonisers We are introduce to a girl of mixed blood and strikingly attractively who is married to Pipa and before which she was a servant in Alfred Corbin's house. Pipa and Mariamu have a son who is light colored and raises suspicion in Pipa's mind. Soon after Mariamu is brutally murdered. The story beyond this point is about their 'fair' son who calls himself prince Ali Khan the era is post colonial and the struggle of the migrants whose rulers were now the Africans is the focus of the story. It was at this time that Shamsis who had a home in this land in large numbers began to pack and leave for North America to England and to India. The life of Rita and Ali in London narrates the usual story of immorality where Rita took up shorthand typing and was treated like a servant but being in London gave the satisfaction which overshadowed discrimination. Ali who called himself a Prince worked as a waiter. But times changed and they fared well. The death of his half brother Amin brought him back home and returned a chanted man. He become a partner of an investment company and his money multiplied and so did his interests. He came close to a woman from Peru and Rita and children were left by themselves.

*Amriika* that was published at the onset of the twentyfirst century is the first novel which is based in America. In the sixties Ramji a student of Dar-es-Salaam, arrives in an American. He is enchanted by the land where there is freedom and wealth and progress. He becomes politically aware, participates in anti vietnam war demonstration and his quest for identity even lards him into an Ashran. He became a part of peace marches protest bombings and religious congregations. He settles down and unsettles then resettles and can be seen as an extension or sequel of the past novels where students leave to study in America. They land up in America- *Amriika*- as in the Indian dilect. One can never therefore forget the Indianness of Ramji, who is a Shansi once again. It seams America is purposely chosen as the title to keep in mind the Indian Origin which crops up.

*Amriika*, the name it self is a metaphor for the future linked with the past America from the perspective of one who is linked with India, a Diaspora coming with hope to place himself in the global scenario. Life in Africa for the Indian Diaspora had no future he tells us that he has come to America to heal his wounds and even save his soul from endless torments, he further says that his ancestors were Hindus who were converted to a sect of Islam and told by that refugee from Mongols to await the final avatar of their God Vishnu. In his grand ma's words, the sun would rise some day from the west.

The people sought it first in Africa, but the west moved further and further and became America. He gives reasons for his migration, ‘<sup>And</sup> in my country Indians like me are called foreigners even though we’ve been there more than a century’

The year 1968 when he came to America was full of the meager of drug peddlers and the violence that gripped the nation due to Vietnam was to was a turning point in America’s history when rights of the blacks and women, for the minorities and the civil rights were on the agenda. There was hope that a more peaceful democracy would emerge.

At such a time Ramji comes into America with his spiritual values that he carried to practice faith daily, not do drink, not to succumb to sexual temptation- and the materialism of the age. he is caught up unawares and his romantic image of the America of John F. Kennedy is in pieces. He seeks solace in an Ashram which becomes his haven for some time as every where gurus, pairs, psychologists, Zealots of every stripe were fishing for disciples to bring comfort to the homeless fortunated spirits. The tyrannical attitude of the country which was for the first time at the top of the world, a superpower that could pomp countries use them and throw them away. The arrogance and intolerance of the mighty superpower lists the life of the migrants like Ramji who can not settle down- neighed in profession nor in personal life. Unlike his earlier books- *The Gunny Sack*, *The Book of Secrets*, where book is rooted in the past *Amriika* looks ahead of Africa. It moves forward and backward in time giving reasons for his leaving Africa as he struggles for existence in America.

*The In- Between world of Vikram Lall* is once again located in Nakuru, Kenya in the 1950s. It is the story of growing up of the children of Indians during and after the Independence struggle. It is focused on the impact of the gruesome acts of violence of the Mau Mau activists –the Africans whose terrorist activities spared no colonial officer and his family. The book is the record of the consciousness of the narrator Vikram Lall. It is for the first time that Vassanji so completely penetrates in to the psyche of the protagonist revealing his inner world. Vikram Lall and his sister Deepa who are children of migrant Indians having a store are friends with two British children Bill Bruce and his sister Annia. They are equally friendly with Njoroge, a Kituyu who is grandson of his gardener. The childhood relations of the children are without any discrimination. Mau Mau group, an extremist group that indulged in terrorism and violence, attacks the neighbours of Vic, killing his friends Bill and Annia and their family. This leaves the children shocked and it has a permanent mark on their mind. Killing of the British women, men and children at the night was not an unusual act of the Mau Maus. Violence strikes closer to Vic’s home and Kenya becomes independent. The Indian community lands no where having

lost their land property family and traditions they are displaced once again. Back home in India the Lall's village is now part of the newly formed Pakistan. They fear similar loses in Kenya as the new government is not ready to acknowledge the rights of non Africans.

The Family shifts from Nukuru to Nairobi and their general condition starts deteriorating. After the Independence the condition of the Indians becomes worse. During the struggle for independence the Indians are against the colonial rule and therefore support the Africans but after independence they are considered agents of the colonisers. Life of Africans during the independence struggle was difficult and dangerous. The Africans did not get any respect from the those who had captured and occupied their land. As a kid Vikram laughed at Masai kids and thought of them as dark exotic savages left behind in the Stone Age...when one saw them on a street they were to be avoided for they smelled so. The Lall's Vic recollects had good relations with the Masai because of his Dad and dadi, grandparents. His Dada even had relations with a masai woman and also a child. When the conditions for the Africans deteriorate Njoroge disappears one day and much later he appears again after many years to the surprise of Vic and Deepa. The story of Vic, Deepa and Njoroge continues to move along the course of the novel making adjustments with the circumstances. The time of the natives takes a turn and they hold important offices in the government, Njoroge, too becomes a powerful man. The love story of Deepa and Njoroge continues but in spite of all efforts of Deepa and Vic, her mother does not allow her to have any relation with Njoroge. Vikram finds his girl friend's family to be against him- her family is a Muslim from Gurjat and he is a Hindu from Punjab. Vic gets a job in the Ministry of Transport, assessing tenders and proposals to the Ministry. As soon as he gets opportunity he starts climbing the political ladder and he has to handle the cash that is collected as bribe in the office. Later in life he is at Toronto, Canada where he is 'one of Africa's most corrupt men, a cheat of monstrous and reptilian cunning? His struggle in Kenya was never ending No one could help him out.'

*The Assassin's Song* is set at a thirteenth century shrine of a mysterious Sufi from the war-torn Central Asia. Writing about this book Vassanji says, 'The inspiration for the book came from the shrines I visited, related to the Gujarat Khoja tradition, their song, called ginans.'

The story is narrated by the heir to the shrine, Karsan Dargawala who grows up in rapidly changing post-independence India. He is the eldest son of a Saheb of Pribaag, The shrine is visited by men of all communities including foreigners. Bapuji, Karsan's father is like a God to the people. Karsan on his eleventh birthday is for the first time introduced to the questions related to human existence which make him 'weep in the dark'<sup>15</sup> He dreads to be the

successor of Pirbaag. He wants to pursue the career of his choice rather than God or His avatar.

Karsan is weary about becoming God to the worshipers- the Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, and mystics who visit the shrine. He sends an application to Harvard which to his surprise is accepted. Karsan's departure brings profound disappointment for his father and heartbreak for his mother. From here begins the second phase of Karsan's life, he feels free from the bonds of inheritance, 'Freedom, simply, to be and to become anew- among people of your age... to think clearly, for the first time about your own life to search for knowledge' But this freedom is at the expense of alienation. Very soon he feels that he is unlike the boys of his age group he is a little aloof, and even nervous. (p.202) He lags behind in his work as he is not accustomed to the culture of time-the fast moving culture mocking, teasing reminding him of his Indianness. Some how no body understands anything about his background, this results in segregation from fellow students. Diaspora writing clearly illustrates that the diaspora occupy a space of exile and cultural solitude, a third space, as termed by Homi Bhabha. For Karsan the question of returning from Cambridge is possible but the desire to remain ordinary keeps him back. Thus the migrant caught between two or more separate cultures, lives on a borderland. He carries his essential strangeness within him. The fact of non belonging creates a new kind of identity giving rise to a neither/nor condition. The complex situation of the postcolonial perception found in their writings

Karsan meets Marge, an American girl whose friendly gesture makes Karsan comfortable for some time but after listening to Karsan's story she accuses him to be too complicated and incomprehensible. He is left friendless "at times lonely and terrified" (p 217) The desire to understand one's culture which is the real mentor of one's identity, attracts a migrant to his roots. He tries to re-establish himself in his land where even after such a long passage of time he finds his place intact. When in an unfortunate incident his son dies and his wife leaves him his life once again becomes lonely but the fear of becoming a special man, a God to the people is so strong that he does not return back until the Gujarat riots consume the dargah. Unable to bear this tragedy, his father passes away. His return to his homeland and towards his inheritance shows how strong the impact of spirituality was on Karsan. The process of self realization finally instils confidence and the spiritual evolution transforms him. He takes over the reins of his ascendancy proving there by that no matter what happens the spiritual strength of the country cannot be destroyed. The Indian culture has borne many such onslaughts but has never given way.

The book celebrates the rich spiritual heritage of India. Physical and mental wreckage cannot destroy the spiritual powers both of Karsan and the

Shrine. When Karsan's parents are dead and the shrine lies unclaimed, unattended, in ruins he realises, 'The role which I once spurned, I must assume' (p. 367). On returning to the Shrine, Karsan's inner strength works wonders. He can not sleep for three nights and is shocked at the savagery that is let loose in the village. But Karsan's presence soon strengthens the confidence of the people. Things come back to normal and Karsan takes the place of his father. His golden touch that his mother fondly mentioned, could now be seen and felt. He says,

I am the care taker of Pirbaag.... There are those to touch my feet or my sleeves, ask for blessings. But 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?( )

This spiritual aspect gives *The Assassin's Song* an insight that is lacking in some of his previous novels. It is the mystical spiritual strength that has brought this change in Karsan. 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. The return to the roots of Karsan is due to his mystical spiritual strength and his eternal bond to the culture of his country. He finds solace only when he is back home.

The journey of Vassanji's diasporic consciousness does not end here His desire to know and understand his country leads him to write a travelogue, *A Place Within: Rediscovering India*. That changed when he made his first trip to his ancestral homeland in January 1993, at a time when Hindu-Muslim riots were plaguing parts of the country. A chance airline strike forced him to crisscross India by train, a journey marked by both euphoria and outright fear, which awakened in him an attachment to a place that was strikingly familiar and strange, one that would draw him back again and again. *A Place Within* gives a picture of India its places of worship ,of architectural skill, of historical importance , its diversity and its unity All sites are holy to him "the deep dissatisfaction of unfinished, incomplete migrations." His knowledge of the languages ,Hindi,Gujrati and Kutchi made him connect more to the people Vassanji is also on a mission to understand his own community – the Khojas from Gujarat, with their centuries-old belief system that blends Sufi Islam and Vaishnavite Hinduism – can continue to exist in a world of increasingly rigid separate ethnic identities. In all his books India is always alive. The customs, the traditions, the languages, the dialect, the lifestyle. the thinking, the hesitations the anxieties all bring into the novels an Indianness of which he was at first apprehensive. In an interview to Chelva Kanaganayakam, he confesses his initial diasporic inhibitions:

There was a very strong tendency to look down upon and even deny the Indian connection. This was a colonial influence. But once I went to the US suddenly the Indian connection became urgently insistent: the sense of origins, trying to understand the roots in India that we had inside us.

## Conclusion

Vassanji's diasporic consciousness has urged him to return to his roots. In *The Assassin's Song* India's presence looms large and throughout. It is set entirely in India, and has been received as an Indian novel. Diaspora consciousness has travelled a long distance from the colonial to the post colonial. The novel seems to say that the diasporas can overcome their pangs of alienation and segregation if they create a new identity in a foreign land not by adapting wholly to the host culture but by evolving and almost metamorphosing into a changed new being, not submitting but creating a space for themselves and an independent identity and must make their country's culture their anchor. Thus proving that their roots are deep and that wherever they are their culture still prevails over the forces of disparity, it dominates their lives and their umbilical cord never gets really dissociated with their motherland. India that had receded to the margins has now come to the centre stage of the writings.

## References:

- M.G.Vassanji 'Am I a Canadian?' in *Canadian Literature* ,190 (Autumn 2006)<<http://portfoliosandinfo.wikispaces.com/file/view/CanLit.pdf> > [accessed 25 August 2011] (para.3 of 21)
- Mishra, Vijay (1996). *New Lamps for Old: Diasporas Migrancy Border*. In Harish Trivedi and Meenakshi Mukherjee ( Eds), *Interrogating Post-colonialism: Theory, Text and Context* , (p.58). Shimla India : Indian Institute of Advance Studies.
- Herrmann, R. K. (2002). *Linking theory to evidence in international relations*. In W. Carlsnaes, T. Risse, & B. A. Simmons (Eds.), *Handbook of international relations* (pp. 119-136). London, England: Sage.
- Kanaganakan, Chelva.(1991) *Broadening the Substrata : An Interview with M.G. Vassanji* . *World literature Written in English* .(pp.29-30) ,31.2.
- Walcot,Derek (December 1992).*The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory: The Nobel Lecture* <<http://sotosay.wordpress.com/tag/derek-walcott-nobel-lecture/>> [accessed 28 April 2011] (para I of 4)
- Author, A., & Author, B. (Year). Title of the work. <http://dx.doi.org/xx-xxxxxxx>
- Kanaganakan, Chelva.(1991) *Broadening the Substrata : An Interview with M.G. Vassanji* . *World literature Written in English* .(p25), 31.2.

- Mishra, Vijay (1996). *New Lamps for Old: Diasporas Migrancy Border*. In Harish Trivedi and Meenakshi Mukherjee (Eds), *Interrogating Post-colonialism: Theory, Text and Context*, (p.68). Shimla India: Indian Institute of Advance Studies.
- Rushdie, Salman.(1992) *Imaginary Homelands* .*Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism*.(p10) , New York: Viking and Granta.
- Cohen, Robin .( 1997 ) *Notions of Diasporas*. *Global Diasporas: An Introduction*.( p26) Seattle:University of Washington Press
- Fludernik, Monika ‘*The Diasporic Imaginary:Postcolonial Reconfigurations* in Monika Fludernik(ed) *Diaspora and Multiculturalism:Common Traditions and New Developments*, (pxiii) New Delhi:Overseas Press/Rodopi.
- Vassanji, M.G.( 1989)*The Gunny* ,( p.25) New Delhi :Penguin
- Vassanji, M.G. (1994), *The Book of Secrets* ,(p.149)New York:Picador.
- Vassanji, M.G. (1999), *Amriika* (p.152 )Toronto:McClelland and Stewart
- Vassanji, M.G. (1989), *The In- Between World of Vikram Lall*,( p.152) New Delhi : Penguin.
- Vassanji,M.G, (18 June,2009) ‘*Personal Notes*’  
<<http://www.mgvassanji.com/PersonalNotes2.htm>
- Vassanji, M.G. (2007), *The Assassin's Song*, (p.2 )New Delhi :Penguin.
- Kanaganakan, Chelva.(1995) *Configurations of Exile: An Interview with M.G. Vassanji* , *South Asian Writers and their World*, (p.129) Toronto :TSAR