

Dilemmas of Transcultural Mobility in M. G. Vassanji's *The Assassin's Song*

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Abstract

The contemporary trend in migration has transformed the world into a space without borders with multiple crossings across national and international boundaries taking place. It has given rise to what Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari characterise as deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation, which, in turn, affects the process of identity constitution and establishing of home. Often it gives rise to a conflict between reality and aspirations, responsibilities and desires. The present paper explores ideas related to transcultural mobility and its impact on identity and belonging as portrayed in M. G. Vassanji's *The Assassin's Song* (2007). Vassanji in the novel creates a transcultural space to examine dilemmas around the concept of roots, as identity travels on other routes in search of better lives and fulfilment of aspirations. The paper examines how mobility empowers even as relationships change with home and with those left behind.

Keywords

Transculturalism, cross-border mobility, negotiating identity, home and belonging, deterritorialisation and reterritorialization

Introduction

Diversity resonates across nationalities and cultures throughout the globe. Attraction of diversity as a possible way of transforming one's reality leads to intensification of mobility across borders. Inevitably such movements result in deterritorialisation or movement away from the country of origin, and reterritorialisation, that is, assimilation into the country of arrival. While vision of belonging to a nation implies an acceptance of its social and cultural roots – something which may happen automatically in the country of birth. However,

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the process of adoption of and assimilation into the new culture invariably involve facing multiple obstacles and dilemmas. There may even be a time when one grapples with the dilemma of choosing mobility or else, sticking to the roots. M. G. Vassanji (1950–) superbly explores these issues in his fascinating novel, *The Assassin's Song* (2007).

M. G. Vassanji, a Canadian citizen born into a family of Indian descent in Nairobi, Kenya, draws from his personal experience to project multiple dimensions of ideas related to mobility and identity in his novel. Jonathan Rollins observes that Vassanji “wanders through his writings from place to place, juxtaposing them and creating interstitial third spaces in the process” (Rollins 1392). Vassanji’s “third space” is reflected in his respect for his lineage, love for his birthplace, fascination for the adopted land, and assimilation into the cultures of all these domains. His intense and gripping way of telling a story is remarkable as he successfully intertwines themes such as displacement, homelessness, uprootedness, a sense of belonging, and search for identity, from the historical perspective as also in the contemporary times of intensive mobility. Timothy Peters in “Review: M.G.Vassanji’s *The Assassin's Song*” states that Vassanji “has succeeded in creating a complex, multifaceted drama, one that interweaves history, religion and politics with a vibrant personal story” (Peters). By connecting with the past, the work demonstrates how mobility is not a new phenomenon but an old one that invariably changes the outlook and perception of the people involved. Vassanji’s multicultural and transcultural upbringing is evident as he reiterates the significance of maintaining a harmonious balance between tradition and modernity. The paper explores the multifold impact of mobility as portrayed in the novel. The focus is on how it changes the way one relates with the self as well as with the world around. It argues that, while there may be multiple challenges and obstacles to overcome, mobility across borders proves to be an empowering experience.

Transcultural mobility and religion

The Assassin's Song set in contemporary India, America, and Canada moves between the past and the present in the manner of a flashback memory. Vassanji in the novel explores the impact religion has on identity, particularly in the light of traumatic incidents of communal violence in history, and whether mobility provides relief from the burden of their painful memories. Vassanji also examines whether one wants to, or can escape the burden of what one’s community does in the name of safe-guarding the boundaries of its faith. The story begins with the return of Karsan, the narrator, from America to his home, Pirbaag – a shrine in India’s Gujarat, worshipped with equal fervour by Hindus and Muslims, but presently in a dishevelled condition due to communal riots. The scene then shifts to America and Canada and later, back to Gujarat and Shimla, tracing and exploring the concepts of home, rootedness, and uprooting. The narrative

follows Karsan in the process of remembering the history of his family spanning from 1260 to 2002 in Gujarat. The first half of the novel deals with Karsan resuming his identity as gaadi-varas (successor) of Pirbaag, while the second is about his yearning to establish his identity away from Pirbaag and living as an ordinary man in America. Towards the end of the novel, he is able to resolve his dilemma and find his identity and solace in the Pirbaag shrine – in his roots amidst its ruins and among his people.

In a way, Karsan goes through the process of deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation only to return to his homeland. His to and fro mobility does not imply that he, at will, lets go of the inherent cultural coordinates underlying his human identity. Rather, like the rhizome, he follows the map which

is open and connectable in all of its dimensions; it is detachable, reversible, susceptible to constant modification. It can be torn, reversed, adapted to any kind of mounting, reworked by an individual, group, or social formation.... Perhaps one the most important characteristics of the rhizome is that it always has multiple entryways. (Deleuze and Guattari 12)

Thus, Karsan demonstrates the possibility of creating and inhabiting a transcultural space where one may consider one's options or make up one's mind regarding how and where to establish home to find a sense of self. Viewed in this context, Vassanji explores how transcultural mobility entails freedom and flexibility of choice to move forward or backward, multiple times without external controls or constraints. Since the choice is of the individuals, the consequences of these movements too have to be borne by the travellers themselves.

As Vassanji narrates the journey of his protagonist in this exquisitely crafted novel, he effectively weaves in many historical events of the time. These historical events play a major role in taking the plot of the narrative forward while linking them with the present. In his interview to Penguin Random House, Canada, Vassanji remarks,

This history is part of my history. This tradition is similar to overlapping with what I grew up.... I discovered myself and how I fitted in into not only East Africa but history and culture of India. It was passion of mine since my twenties. (Penguin Random House)

Vassanji thus acknowledges twin influences on his personality from which he draws significantly in his novel. His frequent visits to the continents – Asia (the land of his lineage), Africa (the land of his birth), and North America (his host land) – help him portray journeys of the characters realistically in the novel.

The portrayal starts with Patan Anularra in Gujarat of medieval India and moves up to a contemporary village, Haripir (the Pir of Hari or the one who is a Sufi of God). Vassanji's focus is on the role history and religion have always

played in shaping political and social relations in Indian society. Hence, his writing of the violent incidents which happened in 2002 in Godhra, Gujarat becomes a way to juxtapose the past and the present and establish a context for an examination of ideas around religion and the play of identities. The incident which continues to be bitterly debated even today pertains to when nearly sixty Hindus including women and children were burnt alive while travelling in the Sabarmati Express train that was returning from Ayodhya – a city embroiled in a controversy between the Hindus and Muslims in India. Subsequently, about two thousand people – mostly Muslims – were killed in what is widely believed as state-sponsored riots (also known as the Gujarat carnage).

Here the Babri Masjid, an age-old masjid was demolished by Hindu mobs who believed it to have been constructed on what was originally a temple. The demolition had resulted in ugly communal riots which disturbed the whole of Gujarat, as well as the whole country. While narrating this, Vassanji also incorporates the tragic saga of the 1947 partition of India to portray how religious faiths have often caused riots and generally been responsible for a lot of conflict and destruction in the country. Alongside these historical events, Vassanji also traces the history of the Indo-China war which also had severely affected the harmonious life of the people. While giving reference to these bloody historical and critical events, Vassanji links them with one another as well as with the contemporary scenario, thus providing a critique of history. His view of history is not just as past, but as constantly affecting, shaping, and transforming identity and belonging in the present as well. The history is also significant in critically comprehending the incidents in the narrative. Thus, skilfully interweaving historical and fictional elements, Vassanji brings a multi-layered complexity to the narrative.

While narrating history of different years, Vassanji makes it clear that Pirbaag is saved miraculously every time because of its spiritual reputation. This highlights his belief how only spirituality can save humanity from destruction. One of the characters in the novel, Dada, Karsan's grandfather may be taken as the novelist's mouthpiece when he says, "But you will find arrogance and bigotry wherever you go.... There will be one kind of Musalman against another kind. Our path is spiritual, we do not believe in outward appearance and names. Rajpal, Iqbal, or Birbal, what does it matter?" (Vassanji 53) Later on, Karsan also wonders if impermanence of everything is the final teachings of Pir Bawa or "is this a symbol of a cynical political system that seasonally lubricates itself with the blood of victims?" (Vassanji 262) Vassanji demonstrates it throughout the novel by showing how Pirbaag accepts people belonging to all religions and faiths during peace as well as during the war/riots/partition. However, Pirbaag's spiritual character crumbles in the face of cunning and shrewd politics of 2002, leading to devastating results.

Even as Pirbaag symbolises a fixed and rooted community, Vassanji lets the outer world in by focusing on the to and fro movement of the people. Mobility in the present world has become a way of life and there often are several reasons for people to move from one place to another. This can be due to a desire to move up in life to acquire respectable social and financial status, to exercise freedom of choice for advancement in almost all fields. Greg Madison aptly points out that “[m]otivations for leaving might be informed by a need for personal space, impinging expectations, and a ubiquitous sense of not really feeling at home in the original ‘home’” (Madison 282). Whatever the reason may be, the person experiencing mobility, willingly or unwillingly, undergoes cultural transformation. Arianna Dagnino succinctly terms it as “the physical deterritorialization and critical distancing from the nation and from one’s native culture” (Dagnino 121). This alteration further leads to a new life and new identity.

Transcultural mobility and responsibility

Karsan’s decision to move away falls under the category of feeling suffocated in one’s home. A resistance to the traditional regime of patriarchal supremacy, the restrictions imposed by his father, and the compulsion to submit to prevalent conventions of his culture makes him leave his home. In search of knowledge and longing for a life among the ordinary people as an ordinary man, he tries to make sense of life in general and that of his own, in particular. According to the tradition of Pirbaag, he has been assigned the responsibilities of its gaadi-varas to take its control after his father. However, he believes that his happiness lies in doing ordinary acts such as, stealing away to Ahmedabad by himself, strolling on the road, watching cinema, and surfing in the bookshop rather than playing the role of gaadi-varas. His yearning for an ordinary human father who would love him or scold him and be available only to him instead of being the “Saheb of Pirbaag” showcases his love for the simple, almost anonymous ways of living. His wonder is genuine when he finds his mother hiding herself from the world under a burqa while doing something she is interested in, especially while watching movies in a theatre, so as to escape being identified by anyone and thereby causing disgrace to the honour of her husband. Thus, Karsan hungers for a simple life, having his own home and identity, free from the familial baggage. However, the reality of his responsibilities towards his family clashes with his desire to enjoy the ordinary acts of freedom of life and this interminable gulf creates a void in his life. This leads him to be in a perpetual state of confusion. Karsan reveals his inner dilemma, saying:

My grievance was based on a contradiction, a double vision of myself. I imagined for myself a life free from the burden and expectation of tradition, to be and think as I wished without my father’s advice or admonition; and at the same time, in some vague, illogical, and dreamlike

manner, I saw myself at 'home' with my family. It was as though I had let go of Pirbaag, but not home. This illusion had to find a resolution. (Vassanji 271)

Thus, Karsan displays a tendency which is not so rare, especially among the young. He yearns to have the security and comfort of home but without the burden of responsibilities. He does not accept Pirbaag as his home because he does not believe it gives him a sense of warmth which is his ardent desire. Additionally, the absence of proper guidance and lack of parental support makes Karsan uncertain of his future as well as identity. He is confused whether he is to be a successor of Pirbaag, a future cricket player for India, or a student going abroad for study. Under such circumstances and in an attempt to escape all constraints, the foreign land seems to be the best alternative available to him. He views it as a land of opportunity that offers him the potential to transform his life and reframe identity. However, ironically, home and family always remain a priority for him in the form of wife and son even in the foreign land.

As Vassanji portrays, religion plays a significant role in shaping one's life. Karsan grows up under the shadow of religion. Gradually he moves away, consciously distancing himself till, at a later stage of life, he begins to feel its need. As he travels from place to place and experiences the company of different people, he begins to understand the importance of his cultural roots. Initially, extreme importance attached to religion becomes the root cause of Karsan's mobility. The burden of abiding by his faith led to an earnest desire to escape from religious restrictions. This puts him on a path of cross-border mobility. While his mother might have accepted and lived within religious boundaries due to lack of opportunities and the burden of gender, Karsan on the other hand, grabs the chances that come his way and sticks to his decision despite experiencing the initial period of some confusion. Religion is, whether one wants to adhere to its demands, or yearns to escape its hold, an important ingredient for forging communal bonds. This helps to connect migrants belonging to a community in the foreign land with one another, and remains a significant factor to bind a person to their culture. However, Karsan's evasion of people having faith in Pirbaag and Pir Bawa residing in America is his attempt to move away from his culture, identity, and belonging. Nevertheless, it demonstrates how religion affects social relations and survives one's mobility as well as deliberate attempts to reframe one's identity.

Vassanji also explores the forced mass movement of people amid turmoil and violence during the partition of India, which too, was a consequence of religious identities. This movement transformed the destiny of the people as well as of the nation. Using religion to settle personal or political scores, forcible conversion of people from one religion to another, communal violence, forced migration of religious communities from one area to another, were the common scenes during partition. Religion became the cause and consequence of mobility

as people were forced to move along religious lines: Muslims to Pakistan, and Hindus and Sikhs to India. The communities that lived side by side for generations, suddenly turned against one another. The tranquillity and serenity was revealed to exist at the surface level only. Probably it acted as a mask to hide the fear, turmoil, and violence, existing in the hearts of the people and the nation. Living together had not led to an intermingling of cultures; rather religion became a hindrance in the establishment of a common culture.

Whatever the cause of mobility, leaving home and settling in a foreign land involves sacrifices though at times, gains as well. One is forced to pay emotional cost, choosing separation from loved ones, often resulting in a life filled with fears and apprehensions in an unknown land among strangers. Karsan constantly has a sense of guilt for having abandoned his responsibilities before and after leaving his homeland, as he says: “[I]hose carefree days on the road, for they numbed my sadness at leaving; by prolonging my stay on the land and saying my gradual farewell to it, I was soothing my guilt” (Vassanji 193). This inherent conflict due to hovering between freedom and belonging becomes the keynote of Karsan’s life making him an embodiment of immigrant dilemma desiring both at the same time. Though he chooses to abandon his home in order to gain freedom, he completes his journey with a return to his roots, home, and culture, thus reclaiming his identity. Eventually, he is able to reconcile with both his being and what he has continuously been trying to become.

At the same time, he is afraid of being overpowered by the worldly illusions ruling supreme in the foreign land. He remains a product of his past, hovering between the emotional link to homeland, and the opportunities realised due to exercise of freedom in the new surroundings. Thus, caught in the quandary of choosing between the two, he finds it difficult to make any final decision. After all, both options are equally desirable. As responsibilities are another name for home and wanderings for freedom, the simultaneous longing for the two makes life complicated. Now he faces the dilemma: either to choose the home, and let go of the freedom to move wherever he wishes to, or else, to choose to be mobile and give up connections with the home. Vassanji in the novel superbly juxtaposes the consequences of following both options, both ways, thereby demonstrating the difficulty inherent in taking any one decision.

Home and belonging

As a matter of fact, mobility does not bring desired results immediately. There are certain apprehensions that precede and follow it. For a migrant, the past is something that cannot be left behind; the future is uncertain but hopefully bright, and a successful migrant always maintains a balance between the two. To gain a whole new world, roots and culture play a significant role since who a person is, is as important as who he was. A migrant’s attachment to the roots and simultaneously, sprouting up of new branches and leaves opens up a desired

space to them. As Vassanji narrates, human beings are attached to their place of belonging that holds sanctity in itself. Further, having roots in a place is the basis of the idea of belonging to a society and culture. This belonging remains an integral aspect of identity throughout one's life. Roots signify security and safety and some sort of attachment – physical, emotional, or psychological. In one of his articles “So as Not to Die” Vassanji emphasises the significance of roots and identity, stating:

Therefore when I left my home country, Tanzania, my city, Dar es Salaam – which was my world – and my community, the Gujarati Khojas, for the United States, I immediately felt a sense of being historically adrift. Who was I, beyond the superficial description of my passport? There was a need to orient myself, to be rooted in a place, in a history, as everyone else around me, as everyone else in the world, seemed to be. (2848)

Thus, mobility may involve a changed kind of rootedness and belonging; roots, nevertheless, are central to a sense of safety, security, and attachment.

Contrary to this idea however, Karsan attempts to make a fresh start towards a fruitful life after severing his connections with the past. Herein, transcultural space throws up a lot of opportunities and opens up new vistas for him. Karsan is able to see it clearly, stating: “[S]ometimes, 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 we are all the same. And it seems that I had to come to America to learn about myself?” (Vassanji 224). Karsan thus now develops a global perspective foregrounding the interrelated issues of migration and generation gap. At the same time, negotiating the transcultural space is not without a struggle. Nostalgia sets in, especially during the initial period that proves to be quite traumatic. A sense of loneliness overtakes Karsan, sometimes he feels “naïve and nervous, lonely and terrified” (Vassanji 217) as there is always a “flip side to the joy and exhilaration of freedom” (Vassanji 217). He misses his home, Pirbaag, Bapu ji, Ma, and Mansoor, his brother. His father's letters of instructions to him about what to do and what not to, terrify him. He feels as if he is “drifting into nothingness, into an endless darkness, anchorless; without belief, without love; without a people or nation to go home to” (Vassanji 220). He decides to “take the terror of the unknown with the thrill of discovering myself and the world” (Vassanji 220). He writes a letter to his father explaining,

I am only trying to understand myself.... Life here, among so many different kinds of people, is challenging, and exciting because every moment I am compelled to ask questions of myself and compare myself with others. How different are they from me? To tell you the truth, talking and discussing and arguing about life with them, I find that we are not so very different! (Vassanji 222)

Vassanji, thus, emphasises the need for understanding things from multiple points of view.

Transcultural mobility and freedom

Karsan's mobility provides him with the freedom of choice. America proves to be a fertile and productive land for him. His efforts to fully assimilate into the culture of the adopted land pay off. He feels his life is complete; he has attained success and has his family with him. After all, these are the twin concerns after mobility. On the streets of Boston-Cambridge in America, he feels free – free as a bird in the infinite sky, free from the burden of serving as the *gaadi-varas* of Pirbaag, from the restraints of the shrine. Away from the dark side of history of communal strife in India, he feels as if a new life has come to him. His heart throbs with new hope, excitement, and exhilaration at the knowledge he gets from books by philosophers, poets, and scientists. All this enables him to create a space for himself in the land of arrival and aids in his assimilation into its culture. Karsan makes his cultural trans-patriation the foundation of a new, more fruitful identity. He is able to go beyond the limits of an oppressive patriarchy and/or nationalism to choose his own destiny and self.

Karsan celebrates and rejoices in the diversity of human life with multi-ethnic and multi-religious attitude. There are no signs of ambivalent affiliations or in-betweenness that entail a constant shifting of values and multiple fluctuations. Karsan's transcultural attitude and mobility empower him with knowledge, freedom, family, and the lifestyle of a common man. Thus, Vassanji in this novel, through the character of Karsan, may be seen as projecting the tendency to celebrate hybridity and intermingling of cultures. At the same time, Vassanji acknowledges the presence of some difficulties when representative of one culture counters elements of another at the initial stage of accepting the new culture.

Transcultural mobility and community

Vassanji through this novel thus draws attention to cultural, religious, and social differences of the homeland and the host land. Religious differences are quite obvious though social and cultural ones come to the fore while living in the adopted land and amidst the process of assimilation into that culture. Karsan observes that time that is taken quite casually in India is followed passionately and sincerely in America where life moves on a fast pace. He says that “there were clocks everywhere in this fast culture, mocking, teasing, reminding, admonishing, their two hands raised like whips to goad you, run, run, you are late” (Vassanji 202). He is least used to it and finally realises, “[I]his wasn't India. Time ruled” (Vassanji 203). Appreciating the modernisation and technological development, learning new English and a diversity of people give him a hard time in the country of arrival. His acceptance of an attitude similar to that of the

Americans towards time and several other matters demonstrates how a successful migrant understands and acknowledges the changes that come their way. In addition to this, he finds vibrancy and liveliness among the people and the American culture showcasing an enthusiasm for life. As a matter of fact, it is very difficult to come to terms with such cultural and social differences, yet, a mobile subject in spite of every difference, learns to compromise with and accept it to enhance one's perspectives and prospects.

In addition to the social, religious, and cultural factors, Vassanji highlights the significance of familial support in a migrant's life. Identity and belonging constitute the lived experience of home and family. The surroundings and environment at home help in the formation as well as discovery of one's identity. Any change in this environ, integration or disintegration of family unit, transform one's identity. Greg Madison rightly observes in another context, "Just as borders are in flux, as we've seen in recent re-mappings of the world; the 'belonging' aspects of our identities are also fluid: 'who I am' is in constant relation to where I am and who I am with" (Madison 1830). Identity thus is always fluid and becoming. Marge's leaving Karsan after death of their son, Julian, upsets Karsan's well-settled life making him aware of the lived life in America and yearn for the un-lived life left behind. Vassanji thus demonstrates the impossibility of establishing roots without the company and support of family. Roots and relations thus remain an innate part of identity even as the yearning to leave and escape their hold stays vibrant and alive. The dilemma thus is almost impossible to be resolved decisively and finally, either way.

The "emotional vacuum" (Vassanji 251) Karsan experiences is due to the disintegration and dissolution of his family. This makes him realise his mistake of letting go of his past bonds. The vacuum is not merely at the individual level but also represents social, communal, and cultural emptiness. His loneliness and isolation, he wonders, may be fulfilled only with his return to his home. He is not sure if or what he has gained from his freedom and escape from his responsibilities. Thus, though Karsan has achieved material success and happiness with his mobility, he realises that, for his sense of self and belonging, he must return to his roots. It is evident, "although he estranges himself intellectually, Karsan never manages to disentangle himself emotionally from home" (Sayed 511). Inhabiting a place away from home, he now clearly understands the gap between belonging and unbelonging, home and homelessness, security and insecurity, warmth and loneliness, and tradition and modernity. The choice to return however too is not so simple and has its own set of implications and dilemmas.

Violence, transcultural mobility, and identity

Vassanji employs the changing nature of Pirbaag and its impact on Karsan to further add to the confusion, thereby indicating the gap between being and becoming. After all, as Stuart Hall theorises, identity is

a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as of ‘being’. It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture.... Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture and power.” (Hall 225)

Vassanji reveals this gap by showing how things were before Karsan left home and how these have become when he returns. As Vassanji portrays, after the Godhra calamity, Pirbaag, so far a symbol of communal harmony too is in turmoil. Being a shrine of saints and Sufis in Gujarat, it had always taken care of people belonging to all religions, castes, or creeds without any discrimination. However, a ravaged Pirbaag, with a desolated mausoleum of Pir Bawa, Nur Fazal, and ruined grave of his son Jafar Shah, is obviously not the place offering shelter, security, and sanctity. Rather it now gives the eerie feeling of up-rootedness and homelessness. This demonstrates how violence wherever it is, in the native country or the foreign land, makes a person homeless. Hence whether it is about the Godhra incident, or partition, or any other, the consequent devastation is the same everywhere. Nevertheless, in spite of the bloodshed, pull of the homeland never lessens ever. This becomes clear from the incident of a bomb blast in Jalalabad, Afghanistan in 2018 that led to the displacement of many families who came to Delhi to settle down but were not able to do so comfortably. Their desire to go back to their homes despite prevalence of violence in Afghanistan, even while wondering “if Afghanistan is better than Delhi” (*The Tribune*), clearly indicates their sense of belonging and attachment to their roots. Thus, the past always remains with a migrant with its strong pull and identity.

Pirbaag’s past and present states symbolise Karsan’s past and present selves. His striving to achieve a sense of inner balance and harmony leads him to search for the identity of Pirbaag’s founder, Nur Fazal, a Sufi saint, Pir Bawa or Mussafar Shah or the Wanderer, having roots in Persia of the thirteenth century. The community has faith in their Pir Bawa even though they do not know much about him; people hardly

cared about his historical identity – where exactly he came from, who he was, the name of his people. His mother tongue was Persian, perhaps, but he gave us his teachings in the form of songs he composed in our own language, Gujarati. (Vassanji 3)

Having “no fixed abode” (Vassanji 6) as a transcultural subject, Nur Fazal wandered from one place to another. Karsan however unearths at the end of the narrative that he was actually a murderer, escaping from a pool of bloodshed. Nur Fazal’s real identity is discovered when Karsan gets hold of an unjacketed

white hardback book borrowed from the library. The book reveals that Nur Fazal belongs to “a Shia Muslim sect in medieval Persia with a knack for dramatic political assassinations” (Vassanji 351). The revelation of Nur Fazal's reality makes Karsan come to terms with the strands of his own identity. Along with learning the truth about Nur Fazal's identity, Karsan also comes to know about the death of his father during Godhra riots. This causes a profound and transformative change in his understanding of his self and lineage. This not only helps him understand his present but also enables him to decide for the future as well.

Karsan realises that Nur Fazal moves from the familiar to the unfamiliar land not in search of his identity but to hide his original identity and subsequently create a new one. He is successful at forging his new identity in an unknown land and among unknown people and culture. Moreover, he remains alive in the minds of future generations sharing profound affinity with them. His own strangeness and foreignness does not hinder his belonging to the strange land and foreign people. Rather he adapts to the adopted land and becomes adept at its culture and surroundings showing the transcultural traits of acculturation that Fernando Ortiz describes as learning and “acquiring another culture” in addition to deculturation where a person unlearns the previous culture (Ortiz 102). From Nur Fazal's life story, Karsan thus learns the possibility of choice – to build one's life the way one chooses it to be.

Vassanji emphasises that even though there is a gravitational pull of heritage and the past, the present era is one of transculturation and a commingling of cultures. There is no space for ethnic or religious purity which often causes obstruction in the path of development. Presently, human beings cannot be confined to a single or mono-identity rather it is a time of revelling in multi-identities and multi-cultures where the benefits of all cultures come united at one place. Although there are problems and challenges in cross-cultural connections, these also create a brave new world of possibilities and opportunities.

Name and identity

The change of name from Karsan to Krishna Fazal reflects an openness to adapt to the emerging situations. In fact, many of the characters possess overlapping identities. The real name of Marge Thompson, Karsan's wife, is Mira. Mira, a female devotee of Lord Krishna is an important character in Hindu mythology. Hence, like Mira, Marge, a Canadian, is also an Indian. Her brother too becomes George from Gautam. Her mother, Cathy is from Iowa, a Christian and her father, Padmanabh is from India and a Buddhist. Marge's upbringing in two different cultures and her happy life with Karsan without any cultural differences and conflict until the breakdown of her marriage is perhaps due to her transcultural traits. A pluralistic perspective of the world enables one to undertake

creative adventures, going beyond cultural borders and barriers to build relations with deep sensitivity and empathy. Contrary to the transcultural characteristics of Marge's personality is Mansoor, Karsan's younger brother, who renames himself Omar after his conversion to Islam. Tejpal's younger brother Rajpal becomes Iqbal declaring his faith in Islam and the Quran. Their seeking of identity in religious orthodoxy displays a fascination to belong to a fixed identity. Vassanji thus presents a collage of fluid identities existing in the transcultural world, making conscious decisions to follow or not, temporarily or permanently, the boundaries of any particular, given identity.

Mobility, as Vassanji portrays, transforms the life and identity of not only the person who moves but also of those who are left behind. Their struggle is no less hard than the mobile subject as to cope up with life without a family member is not an easy task. In the past, it was more difficult as there were no means of connection which however is not the case in the present scenario with availability of advanced and quick means of communication and technology. While a migrant faces nostalgia and a sense of alienation, the family back home suffers from the same issues along with several others. The disintegration of Karsan's family and Pirbaag is the result of Karsan's mobility as after Karsan's departure, there is no one else to take care of both. Mansoor's incapability of shouldering such responsibilities makes Karsan's mobility more troublesome for the family. Even Mansoor's going astray from his path can be attributed to Karsan's moving away from him though Mansoor showed certain signs of rebellion even in Karsan's presence. They both have a strange relationship that Vassanji sensitively describes after Karsan's return:

Here we were, two bereaved brothers without a relation in the country, strangers to one another, yet hopelessly entangled with each other. He with his familiarity and antagonism towards me, and his easy dependence on me, and I with my guilty concern and fear for him. (Vassanji 317)

Thus, mobility unexpectedly affects family relationships leaving traces of irrecoverable transformation behind.

Vassanji's interweaving narratives of the past including history and the present along with shifting perspectives of various characters give a strong message to the readers as to how mobility, identity, and transculturalism are interconnected concepts. However, the role of spiritual aspect in one's life too cannot be denied. Karsan finally bows to the last call of his father and decides with determination to revive Pirbaag from its ruins in order to connect with his own identity and ultimately to his roots.

Conclusion

By portraying Karsan's mobility and his lived experience in America, Vassanji brings the east and the west closer, transcending the physical borders of nations and nationalities. He acknowledges the need to identify oneself with one's own

people and perform responsibilities towards them. However, as he portrays, the concept of home keeps evolving and changing with the change of location due to migration. Varied aspects such as past, ethnicity, patriarchal system, home, mobility, generation gap, etc. intersect to shape and reshape one's identity. In this narrative, Vassanji portrays how migration, transcultural interconnections, and return to roots even while having solidarity with multiple cultures, go side by side to frame identity.

Vassanji's reflection upon the practical aspect of migration, the anxiety of displacement, being adept in the foreign culture, and finding one's identity in history, demonstrates that global and local are no longer separate, rather these are always interdependent. While critically analysing the ethics of these complex issues, Vassanji highlights the intersections of the transcultural world. He fictionally explores national and international physical, social, and religious spaces to endorse the interrelation of concepts of home, mobility, identity, and transculturalism. While he accepts that there are multiple dilemmas which might be thrown up during the process of transcultural mobility, he nevertheless indicates that there are always ways of resolving and/or overcoming them.

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