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**Reterritorializing the Deterritorialized World of Karsan Dargawalla in  
M.G. Vassanji's *The Assassin's Song***



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**ABSTRACT**

Literature has continuously been enriched by the writers who have left their motherland and are scattered across the world for different reasons. As a result, studies began to concentrate more on some areas like immigration, nature of emigration, the process of assimilation, the exile experiences etcetera, which eventually assumed the name Diaspora Studies. As borders of nations began to be more fluid and separatist movements also began to make their appearance, scholars began to study, from a fresh perspective, the movement of people across nations. However, in recent years the word has come to mean any deterritorialised population that is seeking to reterritorialise itself. Although many individual and comparative studies have been conducted on the writers of the various Diasporas, there is a dearth of studies that

analyse this phenomenon as the growth of an individual writer lies within the framework of his continuing encounters with his homeland. M.G. Vassanji, an Indo-African-Canadian writer and a twice displaced migrant, is one among such writers who encounter with the homeland and deal with the immigrant experiences in most of their works. The novel, *The Assassin's Song*, also takes up the diaspora experiences of the protagonist Karsan Dargawalla; his struggle for freedom and independence, alienation and disillusionment, and his reterritorializing of the deterritorialised world.

### **KEYWORDS**

Diaspora, migration, alienation, homeland, identity, immigrant writing

## RESEARCH PAPER

Literature has continuously been enriched by the writers who have left their motherland and are scattered across the world for different reasons. As a result, studies began to concentrate more on some areas like immigration, nature of emigration, the process of assimilation, the exile experiences etcetera, which eventually assumed the name Diaspora Studies. However, Diasporic studies are only about three decades old, for such studies began mainly in the 1980s, with increased globalization. As borders of nations began to be more fluid and separatist movements also began to make their appearance, scholars began to study, from a fresh perspective, the movement of people across nations. It is perhaps from this time that the word 'diaspora' also became more popular. This is not to say that the diaspora had not been studied earlier too. In the past, however, the diasporic studies focused primarily on political and economic aspects; that is, in terms of migration, immigration policies/controls, as well as in statistical terms like how many, from where, etc.

Originally associated with the dispersal of the Jewish people in Sixth century BC, the word 'Diaspora' has, over the years, acquired a more expanded meaning beyond the original connotations of violence, catastrophe, alienation, loss, exile and return. The term diaspora "has been consistently associated with experiences of displacement, dispersal and migrancy." (Tsagarousianou, 53). For the American social scientist Walter Connor, diaspora simply encompasses "that segment of a people living outside homeland". Connor's spacious definition accommodates all the multiplying dispersions that have been renamed as diasporas since 1968. For Vertovec, the term "diaspora" refers to "any population that is considered 'deterritorialized' or 'transnational' – that is, which has originated in land other than that in which it currently resides, and who's social, economic, and political networks cross the borders of nation-states or, indeed, span the globe." It is therefore evident that geographically, "diaspora involves a radical... redefinition of place. Simultaneously, nowadays diaspora increasingly transcends place as a result of the technological revolutions in the telecommunications industry (Stewart13). However, in recent years the word has come to mean any deterritorialized population that is seeking to reterritorialise itself. It is, therefore, no longer specifically applicable only to Jews, and has increasingly been applied to various communities settled in various parts of the world.

The theory of Diaspora is linked to the theoretical discourse on transnationalism and globalization. Tololoyan states that "diasporas are the exemplary communities of the transnational moment". Diaspora discourse reflects a sense of being part of an on-going

transnational network that includes a homeland. It is characterized by a sense of living in one place while simultaneously remembering and/or desiring and yearning for another place. This is because of multiplicity of relations not only between diaspora communities and their homeland in a binary context but because of the on-going, lateral relations among diaspora communities located in different states. However, the diaspora writers of the twentieth and twenty first centuries are concerned mostly with giving a voice to the diasporic consciousness of the displaced and dislocated through their works. More significantly, they are all determined to narrate, and thus put on record, their past (bequeathed memories, oral testimonies, remembered histories) and stories of their voyages. Their works explore the boundaries between fact and fiction, memory and imagination, individual and collective consciousness, drawing from their first-hand experiences of being part of different communities at different points in time

Although many individual and comparative studies have been conducted on the writers of the various Diasporas, there is a dearth of studies that analyse this phenomenon as the growth of an individual writer lies within the framework of his continuing encounters with his homeland. M.G. Vassanji, an Indo-African-Canadian writer and a twice displaced migrant, is one among such writers who encounter with their own homeland and deal with the immigrant experiences in most of their works. Vassanji is deeply concerned with how migrations affect the identities of his characters; an issue that is personal to him as well. Set in different places like India, USA and Canada, Vassanji's complex and multifaceted novel, *The Assassin's Song*, successfully interweaves history, religion and politics with a vibrant personal story. Like most of his novels, it is the diasporic experiences and consciousness of the protagonist that is foregrounded here.

Vassanji begins his novel by introducing his protagonist, Karsan Dargawalla, an immigrant who has just returned to his homeland, as standing amidst the ruins of the shrine of the mysterious Sufi, NurFazal, of Pirbaag, and as recollecting his ancestor's as well as his own past. As the novel unfolds in fits and starts, Karsan rejects his spiritual inheritance and decamps for Harvard in 1970, against his chagrined father's wishes. The three decades of stubborn self-exile that follow represents a sorrowful generational rift between father and son that ends only when Karsan returns home after his ascetic father's death in the communal riot that shook the state of Gujarat.

Karsan Dargawalla's family have been the keepers of the shrine to the mystic Sufi, NurFazal, since medieval times, and the eldest male in the family has always been groomed to be the

Avatar of the God on earth. The family lives in the compound where NurFazal, the Wanderer, finally settled and where his remains and those of his descendants were buried. From the age of eleven, Karsan has been told that one day he will succeed his father as the guardian of the shrine, as the next Saheb, who could see through the seven earths and seven heavens into eternity. As the highest spiritual authority in their region, Pirbaag, he will be God's representative to the multitudes who come to the shrine for penance and worship. But by his very birth, Karsan was ordinary, and he wished to lead an ordinary life, to go to school, play cricket, talk to girls, and make his own choices. He wants nothing more than "to be simply one among many, an ordinary mortal".

As Karsan grows up he struggles with the burden of divinity. He began to confront the conflict between the spiritual and material world. Along with the conflicts in the mind Karsan had to undergo his coronation ceremony. Though he took his vow, Karsan was not freed from his anxieties. He was doubtful whether he could tell the future, or see through the earth into the regions of hell, or cure the bruises. He was still struggling with the questions like "who and what was I? What would my life be in the future? Would it include any fun or joy?", "Was this my future? What could I make of this garden of graves? Wasn't there a way to escape it, find a new destiny?" (TAS 171-78) However, at times when he listens at the early dawn to the rising pure tones of Sheik-ji's azan from his mosque and then the tinkling of the bell and the beautiful ginans from their temple, Karsan would become aware of the fact that he belongs to PirBaag, to that ancient and still mysterious place that spoke something deep and permanent within the soul. But then that moment would pass and the world outside would begin to beckon him. By portraying the conflicts in the protagonist's mind, Vassanji represents the pull of tradition, faith, and the filial devotion on the one hand, and the push of the intellectual curiosity and adventurous spirit on the other hand.

An unexpected opportunity for escape from his destiny however arrives in an acceptance letter from Harvard, where Karsan gets a full scholarship. Karsan decides to leave his home country to "the beating heart of the world". He was determined to leave everything behind, including the thoughts of ugliness that lay beneath the glamour of India. He was offered the temptations of worldliness over Godhood, and he stepped across the line in reality and accepted the offer completely turning his back on that he was supposed to have been.

Karsan's innate curiosity and his eventual disillusion about Pirbaag and the myth of the mystic leads him to the new world of Harvard University. Despite his parent's hesitations, Karsan leaves his home and tradition behind him to "the legendary city of knowledge and

punditry, to its legendary ivy-covered university.” (TAS 201) By taking the decision to move, he actually makes a natural break with his Bapu-ji who had been suffocating him with paternal love and ambition.

A self-described “innocent abroad” during the tumultuous 1970s, Karsan’s time at Harvard proved Edenic: surrounded by virtually unlimited knowledge, he greedily ate the forbidden fruit and seemingly gained the power to “renounce his status.” He found the brashness and vulgarity of America and Americans unbecoming, but he also felt the “freedom from the iron bonds of history.” (TAS 200). The seemingly satisfied soul of an immigrant can be traced in the thoughts of Karsan:

To walk the giddy streets of Boston-Cambridge, breathe deeply each morning the sheer exhilaration of freedom. Freedom from the iron bonds of history; freedom from the little shrine by the dusty roadside with its rituals and songs, [...] to be away! To be independent, to have fun; to brush aside all those restraints of the past and think clearly, for the first time about your own life;... and at last to be one among many, an ordinary mortal, in this world clamouring all around you, with real people and their real concerns. I let myself go. (TAS 201)

Like most immigrants, who leave their homeland in search of better prospects, Karsan had also left his homeland with the hope of having a better future. But later realizes that the dream of freedom and happiness can never be fully satiated. Vassanji addresses with sympathy the numerous troubles and worries which awaited the immigrant in the new land. In Cambridge and Burnaby, Karsan occasionally engages in a self-parody of the Indian immigrant in a white man’s world. The freedom and the happiness that he enjoyed during the first few months of his arrival in the new land did not last for long.

Despite being in the process of adjustment with his surroundings he demonstrates a sense of subtle nebulous links that are latent within; he expresses several inarticulate feelings and unrealized emotions against a new perspective. He starts ruminating over beliefs, customs, ideals and values that *were* his but *are* now on the verge of collapse in the country of his adoption. With the blurring of boundaries in the mental landscape that once surrounded his entire being, Karsan is subjected to a nomadic subjectivity, concerning his status in the new land. In this new setting he is constantly being territorialized, deterritorialized and reterritorialised, creating a gaping void of uncertainty that makes him nostalgic for his mother’s warmth. Karsan’s this plight calls to our mind Stephen Gill’s, a Pak-Canadian poet,

two lines in his poem “The Dove of Peace”, “I wish to breath undisturbed// Within the walls of my womb” (DOP 48)

As time passes Karsan realizes that he was left alone in that alien country for his strange Indian outlook. He begins to luxuriate silence, and a few months later he starts pondering over certain questions like, “what did I expect from myself? Did I want to return and be a Saheb to my people? (But I must.) Silence... Oh, where was buried all these years?” (TAS 205) After those initial cultural awkwardness and nostalgia, Karsan eventually achieves the immigrant dream of success. For three decades Karsan has lived freely, even adopting a new name, Krishna Fazal, to match his new identity. English became his field of specialization in the University. He discovered PhD as a convenient shelter for the alien who knew not the ropes of living in the new country, providing him a world within a world in which to function, to be acceptably eccentric. Later Marge Thompson re-enters his life, and eventually becomes his wife. Then there was no reason for Karsan to look back to his ancestors. He becomes a professor, moves to Canada, and fathers a child named Julian, his own “child-god”. This was what he had desired to be, thinking, feeling person like anyone else, for which he had spurned his calling. For a while, Karsan was filled with such utter joy that he would deny anything that reminded him of his past, and betrayals. His happiness was complete. But there was an existential question that seemed to haunt Karsan at times, “Was I afraid my son would grow up to reject the world I had given him—to turn towards his grandfather, return to those ancient roots?” (TAS 285). However, this question resolves in an unexpected way. He chances to meet with a double tragedy which shakes Karsan completely, and alters his life. His son Julian gets killed in an accident that happened in front of his eyes, and later, his wife, Marge, deserts him. Karsan has been punished for his arrogance. In utter desperation he compares himself to the fallen angel, Azazel who denied his Creator’s order. He thinks:

And I—all my happiness founded on my sense of myself in a larger world, and my love for a woman, and finally our devotion to our child. How flimsy a construct, this happiness, how vain; how easily it tumbled down. Hadn’t I always been taught, all is illusion, all will come to naught? (TAS 294)

Faced with an unrecognized life, monotony, and uncertainty, Karsan turns an immigrant in time and voyages into the future, sometimes with an idealist tinge. Real failures and disappointments, to achieve money, status, power, and success in a country where he hoped to get them, forces him to cope with his surroundings. He also meted out with the conflict



between his loyalty to the old land and his adoptive country. He is in fact disillusioned of all his “illusions”. Having prompted by his conscience and loyalties he wishes for a reunion with his family. And as he wished, one day he receives a letter from his father after a long period of time, asking him to come back to Pirbaag. At that time, Gujarat was overrun by the Hindu—Muslim riot, and in that riot the shrine and his family were destroyed.

Going through the predicament whether should go or stay back, Karsan finally comes over his indecisiveness. There were the moments when his unconscious nostalgia and longings for India has suppressed his conscious self. But he emancipates himself from all the mental conflicts, pain and predicaments that he has gone through, and decides to return to India. The ‘exile’, self-imposed or otherwise, makes one learn that “roots are deep”. Karsan, a self-imposed exile, returns to the old grounds after thirty years, and stands in the midst of an absolute destruction. His father dies even before he could fully reconcile with him. He sits down on the steps of the ruined kingdom that he once rejected. He realizes the impermanence of everything. His move away from divinity ultimately brings him back to where he began. Out of wonder he cries, “Do we always end up where we really belong? Do I belong here?” (TAS 364).

Through a series of random-seeming events which he calls a “miracle, perhaps only miraculous” (TAS 297), Karsan embarks on a renewing path towards self-discovery as he returns to the embattled homeland. He has no idea about what to do with Pirbaag. But eventually he convinces himself that he is the caretaker of Pirbaag, and he would advise people on their worldly affairs when called upon. As his Bapuji would say, the call had come for Karsan, and this time he had to bow. At this intersection of knowledge and faith, Karsan ultimately learns acceptance.

The novel, in short, posits an engaging picture of a human being torn between the two worlds—the self and the society. The fettered self’s struggle for emancipation from the stranglehold of a society appears to be a dominant trait at one point of the novel, but the individual’s struggle for self-liberation is silenced by the buffets of loyalties to the society. The struggle of the self for liberation, at last culminates in a compromise in an affirmation and assertion of the right to live. This note of faith in societal values, and man’s hope for survival despite all the bludgeoning of fate, lends grandeur and magnanimity to Vassanji’s protagonist. Karsan’s journey away from his homeland in search of fresh pastures finally proved that it is only a transitory phase in his life. In a little while all his illusions were shattered, and his antecedents and roots inevitably draw him back to his homeland where he



believes he has a mission to fulfill. Thus, having disillusioned of all the illusions, Karsan finally attains atonement through alienation, and reterritorializes his deterritorialized world.

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