Preface

The thesis “The Doubly Displaced Immigrant: A Postcolonial Approach to M. G. Vassanji’s Fiction” is an in-depth study of the novels and short stories of Moyez Gulamhussein Vassanji, popularly known as M. G. Vassanji. He is a prolific writer who has to his credit six novels, two collections of short stories, and a number of critical essays. He has also established a second reputation as an editor and critic. A nuclear physicist turned full-time writer, Vassanji is now a Canadian citizen living in Toronto. A third generation African of Indian ancestry, Vassanji portrays in his fiction people who are displaced from their roots but have the courage to fight all odds in order to find a respectable place in their land of adoption. His protagonists are second and later generations of African Indians, who migrate to the Euro-American world from post-independence Kenya and Tanzania as an outcome of the reversal of power structures and black ascendancy.

People who are displaced, dispossessed, alienated and exiled occupy Vassanji’s narrative centre and they are of course the Asians and the Shamsis in particular. Being long severed from their roots, they face a crisis of identity. In India they are not accepted as Indians but only as Africans; in Africa they are not Africans but Indians and in the white Euro-American world, they are South Asians. They are people who are doubly displaced from their ancestral roots in India. Vassanji tries to make them understand their actual selves by giving them a voice and a being. Reclaiming the past—their history, language and ethnicities—gives his protagonists a feeling that
they are not totally rootless. Even in the face of the marginalization, threat of nativization and racial discrimination that they face in the white man’s land, Vassanji’s protagonists try to assert, at least as long as it is possible, their Afro-Asian syncretic identity.

The thesis is organized into five chapters. The first chapter, titled “Introduction: Border Crossings,” is an attempt to trace the relationship between immigrant writing and postcolonialism so as to legitimize diasporic literature as a salient area in postcolonial literary studies. It also deals with Canadian multiculturalism, the South Asian diaspora in Canada and a brief history of Indian immigration to Canada in order to place Vassanji in the Canadian multicultural mosaic. A brief biography of the writer and a note on the major themes in his works have also been included.

Chapter Two, “The Dialectics of Place and Displacement: No New Land and The In-Between World of Vikram Lall,” after tracing the disjunction between place and space brought about by colonial intrusion, takes a close look at the trauma of displacement precipitated by migration and transplantation of the immigrants in the alien land. Double displacement is a common phenomenon and a recurring theme in all the five novels and some of the short stories. But for the sake of greater clarity the various levels of displacement have been analyzed in detail by probing the mindset of the protagonists of the two novels—the second and the fifth. This explains the break in the chronological order of the texts.
The third chapter, "Versions of History: The Gunny Sack and The Book of Secrets," provides a close survey of historiography, new historicism and the disruption of the wall that separates history and fiction by analyzing how family sagas are woven into the master narratives of history. Interpolation of marginal histories can be seen as one of the most strategic and powerful modes of cultural resistance. Once again, the chronological order of the texts has been disrupted for the sake of a detailed study. While the artifacts in an old gunny sack serve as memory aids to the rewriting of history in the first novel, the diary of a colonial administrator serves as the tool for reconstructing history in Vassanji’s third novel, The Book of Secrets. Vassanji’s fourth novel, AMRiiKA has not been analyzed in isolation as it is set exclusively in the US and concentrates more on the personal and political awakening in the protagonist against the larger context of American power politics. However, all the aspects analyzed in the core chapters have been traced in the novel.

Chapter Four, "Retelling Hybrid Ethnic Stories," throws light on how the doubly displaced immigrants make desperate attempts to preserve their cultural identity in the land of adoption. The first part of the chapter highlights the way in which language is used as an ethnographic tool in postcolonial literatures in general and by Vassanji in particular. The latter part of the chapter concentrates on the folklorish elements that Vassanji makes use of in his fiction for recording a way of life that is slowly disappearing.
The fifth chapter, “Conclusion: Asserting a Syncretic Identity,” is an evaluation of Vassanji’s canon of five novels (a critique of the sixth is included as an Appendix to the thesis) and two collections of short stories—*Uhuru Street* and *Elvis, Raja: Stories*—as showing a pattern when analyzed from the point of view of the double displacement of characters and the question of their assertion of a syncretic identity. The assertion of a syncretic identity becomes a social need in the land of adoption as the immigrants do not want to lead a faceless existence. They do not contemplate a total merger with the culture of the adopted land, at least in the near future and try to preserve their ethnic specificity as long as it is possible, however hybrid it may be.

A study of Vassanji’s sixth novel is included as Appendix I. *The Assassin’s Song* was published in August 2007 when the thesis was nearly finished. A cursory analysis however reveals how Vassanji makes use of some of the staple ingredients of his fiction, casts them into newer moulds and gives a unique dimension to the concept of syncretism.

Appendix II carries excerpts of an on-line interview of Vassanji conducted by the researcher. It seeks to complement the analysis of the foregoing chapters and also highlight certain aspects of his creative preoccupations that earlier interviews have either sidelined or ignored. The “Works Cited” at the end of each chapter provides immediate references and “A Select Bibliography” included at the end of the thesis aims at helping future researchers in the area.