Chapter - 5

Amriika & The Assassin's Song:
Traditions & Desires
The researcher in the fifth chapter wishes to deal with the two novels, “Amriika and The Assassin’s Song” together. Truly speaking in both these novels multiculturalism is the main subject though the characters vary a lot. Vassanji is an Indian-born author. He amazingly describes an American – African immigrant’s experience of three decades in the recent American history. He names the novel 'America'. Leaving for the United States from East Africa in the year 1968, the hero of the novel Ramji has been dragged into Campus radicalism, the influence of some charismatic men and otherwise tempting women, and eventually contented marriage and his fatherhood. By chance, after many years he meets a younger woman. He feels that he has to relive his dreary dead life with the new life partner. In this way it is a very good story and the secondary character too mingles with the protagonist in the story.

M.G. Vassanji is a much gifted writer. The strength of this gifted writer is that he can produce many creative characters. About this novel he says in his Author's note that "This book is work of fiction. All the characters described here, the institutions called the Tech and Is, and the tours of Rummymede, Glenmore, and Ashfield are fictitious', also fictitious are various organizations, including Inqalab international the Freedom Action Committee, the Third World Liberation front, and the Restore Iran Movement. The events described in the novel are imaginary except for the obvious and acknowledged historical ones. He conveys that this novel is a fiction coloured with some historic incidents to establish 'multiculturalism'.

The beginning of the novel Amriika is undoubtedly a promising one. There are tantalizing mysteries such as why the hero is alone and bewildered. What is the 'instant notoriety' that refers to, why does he suffer the probing attentions of a certain representative of law', who are the three college-aged kids who have him under benign surveillance? And then the readers jump back to 1968.

M.G. Vassanji's fourth novel is Amriiku. Once again it deals with the themes and ideas that recur throughout his other novels. It is an excellent tale of immigrant
experience. It explores the state of living in exile. In 'More Personal Notes on the Book' M.G. Vassanji himself has expressed his views about this book. He says:

"How far can political commitment and radical dissent go? How far west can you go? In Canada this novel, beginning in Boston-Cambridge in the Vietnam War era, was seen as documenting the travails of an immigrant; in India it was seen pre-cursing 9/11. The reader can draw his or her conclusion. "America" is how Indians pronounce America."

(Amriika Personal Notes).

The mesmerising location "Passage to India" ("Passage to India", The Romantic Movement in American Writing, P.648.) is inextricably associated in the public and with E.M. Forster's well known novel. So someone is surprised to learn that it was not the colonial Forster but the great American poet Walt Whitman who coined this phrase. In his excellent poem of the same name, Walt Whitman mediated on how the search of Europe for this fabled sub-continent ironically led to discovery of America. For this great American poet, America symbolized "the great achievements of the present" (P. 648) and "the facts of modern science" (P. 649) while India stood for "the past! The past!". (P. 649) the old, most populous, wealthiest of earth's lands" (P. 652) [of] "flowing literatures, tremendous epics, religions, castes." (P. 652) Given Walt Whitman’s moorings in the ninteenth century, it is not remarkable that these Orientalist dichotomies pervade his writings; what is amazing is their prophetic qualities. Today, the America-India interlinks about which Walt Whitman fantasized seem to have grown even more powerful. And indeed it turns out that M.G. Vassanji’s fine novel; quaintly entitled Amriika begins its multicultural and philosophic journey with yet another quotation from the poem "Facing West from California's Shores." (Amriika, P.1).

What happens. metaphorically. when an immigrant stands on the California shores, "the circles almost circled?" He cannot help but look homeward and seek to recall the original purpose of his displacement. At the end of this land he must assemble his memories, releases both the strengths and fragility of new relationship
he has made. The novel *Amriika* is concerned with precisely these troubled issues as they arise in the mind of its protagonist, Ramji. This earnest and intelligent novel, the fourth from the Indian born author of *The Book of Secrets*, sedulously charts an Asian African migrant’s experience of three decades of recent American history. Here is a writer from the Indian diaspora who wishes to write back not just to the empire, but also to his homeland.

Praised for its combination of history and fiction, *The Gunny Sack* was a movingly told story of a small community of Asian Africans, whom M.G. Vassanji called the Shamsis. "This community corresponds to the Ismailis, who regarded Aga Khan as the 10th avatar of Vishnu." In *Uhuru Street*, M.G. Vassanji went back to the lives of Cutchi settlers in Dar es Salaam. In *Amriika*, M.G. Vassanji uses the same material, but with a new twist. A writer whose most evocative works are distinguished by luxurious subtleties and a light of touch, M.G. Vassanji does allow his narratives to slide on occasion towards a heavy-handed characterization and somewhat stilted dialogue. Too often in his more traditionally structured novels – No *New Land* and ambitious *Amriiku* - M.G. Vassanji sacrifices explorations of nuanced character and story in favour of examining what might be best described as the anthropological or sociological tensions confronting immigrants drawn to uneasy promise of a future in North America. Traching the struggles of an idealistic young Asian African who leaves home in the late sixties to attend an American college. *Amriiku* engaged the backdrop of three tumultuous decades in American history, a period of anti-war protests, radicalized politics, sexual openness, and spiritual quests. (*"Looking Buck"*, *Online Edition of the Hindu*).

This is a remarkable novel of personal and political awakening, which spans three decades and explores the eternal quest for home. It is essentially a North American novel, told from the point of view of a man from "Dar es Salaam" from East Africa in 1968. Ramji, a student. arrives in an America far different from the one he had dreamed about and was caught up in anti-war demonstrations, revolutionary lifestyles, and spiritual quests. As he grows apart from his community of foreign students, Ramji finds himself pulled by the tumultuous currents of the times, much
later, with his marriage faltering, and living a suburban life in a *changed* America. Then he meets a young woman from Zanzibar, and feels that a different and more authentic life is possible for him in her company until *mysterious* visitors from Ramji’s past arrives in their midst.

Thus ‘Amriika’ is a novel of betrayal, disillusionment, and discovery set in America during three highly charged decades in the nations history. In this novel Vassanji is particularly good at delineating the delicate *mixture* of idealism and smug centuries that *made the* young people of the day so irritating and so appealing. This is mainly an earnest and intelligent novel, the sort of one *from* an Indian horn author, *sedulously* charts on Asian-African history. This novel of America may be viewed as a classic *immigrant* story, which *becomes* among other things, like a snapshot of the past three decades, a primer on dissident politics, a suspenseful mystery and a love story.

M.G. Vassanji, a gifted writer. is a shy, reticent *man* who hardly looks or behaves like a famous writer, *Like The Gummy Sack, No New Land* and *The Mook of Secrets*, his *Amriika* is a fantastic *piece* of work. It is a well told, *even* observing story that adds to Vassanji’s already versatile and considerable oeuvre. It is an outstanding novel of personal and political awakening that spans *three* highly *charged* decades of America and explores the eternal quest for home. Dealing with the theme of rootlessness, it suitably and beautifully articulates nearly all the features of multiculturalism. Talking of this book and the protagonist Gene Carey is of the view:

>“Vassanji has inevitably woven his newest tale around the issues of exile, longing, displacement and. ultimately. acceptance. The world of the *1960s* from the backdrop – a world of changing values and sexual freedom, of peace marches, religious cults, and protest bombings – that is the world that Ramji inherits and shapes to *make* his own.”

Ramji the hero and his friend Sona are two scholarship students from Dar es Salaam *plunged* into the *radical* upheavals of *1960s* America and Vassanji is
particularly good at delineating the delicate mixture of idealism and smug certainties that made the young people of the day so irritating and so appealing. He is also good at the plight (and pleasures) of the immigrant/innocent abroad in America’s careless affluence and benign amorality (Ramji loses his virginity to the cancer-afflicted wife of his American host family).

What Vassanji is not good at is making the readers care about Ramji, about the woman he marries, the (different) woman he loves, the friends, the colleagues, and the politics that sweep him along to the very periphery of terrorism. It is Vassanji’s endlessly flat, one-thing-after-another style that distances the readers—the characters develop all the nuance and complexity of the people in a breaking news story. The frequently essay-ish tone ("Hut as subsequent events went on to prove...") doesn’t help either.

The main character in this book, Ramji, finds himself in exactly the same situation in 1995 in Los Angeles as he had been in 1970 in Boston: harbouring a suspected bomber. In one case it had been an American middle-class radical woman, in the second case a young man who had at one time been an anti-Iranian activist supported by the American government, and has now, as an outraged Muslim, bombed a bookstore in the Midwest.

After the shocking events at the World Trade Centre, this book seems to have an eerie timeliness to it. While not exactly predicting terrorism in the magnitude in which it recently occurred, this book does take a hard look at why America is often both loved and hated; more importantly, it shows how slippery the slope can be, in today’s world, between political commitment and sympathy for the causes behind terrorism, and the barbaric act of terrorism itself. On the way it shows the conflicts within the world of Islam as well.

Amriika confirms M.G. Vassanji’s reputation as unique chronicler of our times. It is written from the point of view of a third world immigrant from Dar es Salaam. East Africa. In this beautiful and richly textured mosaic of lives and events, M.G. Vassanji deals with the personal experience of an immigrant named Ramji from
the Cutchi Ismaili Muslim community. As M.G. Vassanji did in *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall*, he guides his narrator to a safe location to reminisce. In *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall* it is Southern Ontario in Canada but in the present novel it is California.

Ramji, an immigrant from Dares Salaam, narrates many parts of this novel by Vassanji. These parts tell a compelling story of displacement and its after effects. From the Gujarat he never knew, to the Dar es Salaam he grew up in, to the America he adopted as his own. M.G. Vassanji traces the multicultural journey of an immigrant in *Amriika*. The name of this immigrant is Ramji who is the protagonist of this novel. He seems to be modeled so closely on M.G. Vassanji himself. Here the author records his initiation into student life in Boston. The students lives have been described in a more realistic and reasonable manner.

The strength of M.G. Vassanji’s new novel, his first since 1994’s *The Book of Secrets*, is that it has the urgency of television news. That is its fatal weakness too, for like television news, it manages to be sensational while remaining curiously flat and unengaging. Perhaps that is the danger of event-based narrative.

The beginning, though, is promising, there are tantalizing mysteries – why is the hero alone and bewildered, what is the "instant of notoriety" he refers to, why does he suffer "the probing attentions of a certain representative of the law," who are the three college-aged kids who have him under benign surveillance? And then we jump back to 1968.

The plot of this novel is very straightforward. Indian origin boy, a second generation African, Ramji is a native Gujarati Muslim. He belongs to a small community of Cutchi Ismaili Muslims who have settled in Dar es Salaam. His parents are dead and his deeply religious grandmother raises him. Like M.G. Vassanji himself, he leaves his home, and his grandmother in Dar es Salaam, to pursue a bachelor degree on scholarship at the Boston ‘Tech’, a prestigious American school. As a student he arrives in the United States in 1968 from Dar es Salaam, East Africa. "It was time of protest and counter culture." Studying at 'Tech' which is obviously
modeled on MIT, he is drawn into campus radicalism. He very soon finds himself engulfed in radical politics, especially the anti-war movement. It is certainly very similar to the life of M.G. Vassanji as he sees himself in this character. ("Looking Back". Online Edition of The Hindu).

Almost immediately, the readers are vouchsafed a poignant glimpse of our hero being seduced by Ginnie, wife of his American host. It is she who has terminal cancer. This host family provides him with the safe haven he needs in order to find his feet. The adolescent Ramji conies of age when his fascination for his hostess, Ginnie, culminates in a brief affair, and leads him to shed his inhibitions. He loses his virginity as a result.

The usual campus entanglements, both romantic and radical, follow. Ramji’s extensive soul-searching during college involves participation in student demonstrations and residency at the ashram of a local guru. Rukmini Bhavya Nair observes:

> Various American beauties involve Ramji in marches against the Vietnam War, with Indian gurus and so forth. Science is represented too in the form of a charismatic, wheel-chaired physics professor who enables Ramji to see himself as a Schroedinger’s Cat ‘smeared’ between cultures. All very exciting, but in time, Ramji finds himself adrift in middle age and caught in a doomed marriage. Twin children and much acrimony later, the American dream appears to have lost its savour. (“California Dreaming”. India Today).

From the America of late sixties, M.G. Vassanji moves to what one sees as our present today. The readers find that many Ramji’s revolutionary classmates have disappeared into comfortable middle class lives and Ramji himself is trapped in an unhappy marriage. With the change in times, Ramji moves into a mundane middle age with a faltering marriage, adultery, children and what we generally call life.
The novel has a repetitive duel movement. It is duel in that it combines two plot lines. One, seemingly the dominant one, is personal; the other is political. It is repetitive in that Ramji goes through similar experiences. both politically and personally, in both parts of the novel. The first part ends with two terminal events, the first of which is political, while the second personal.

Ramji is implicated in a bomb-blast for which a radical dropout that he has known is responsible. Though he suspects that Lucy-Anne is guilty. Ramji shelters his friends in his room. Luckily someone else tattles on her and Ramji gets off scot-free. The woman in question curses him before she goes to jail, assuming that it is Ramji who has betrayed her. Thus he lost her friendly nature and she becomes his worst enemy and waits for an opportunity to harm him permanently.

On the personal front, the aging protagonist falls in love with an intriguing beautiful and mysterious young woman from Dar es Salaam. He comes in close contact with this young woman of mixed African and Indian ancestry. She is the daughter of a radical political figure notorious for attacks on the Indian community in Zanzibar. This eventually results in the breakdown of his marriage. He is divorced. Madhumita Bhattacharyya presents this event in the following words:

He finally leaves Zuli for the exotic. selfish Rumina, who idolizes him. Her character is also sketchy, and she becomes yet another peg for her lover's confusion.

The second part of the novel is triggered by the latter catastrophe. Overcoming his initial distaste for Rumina he finds a soul mate in her. He feels that his new life with Rumina is his second chance, his opportunity to rediscover who he is—a return to his philosophy. To start over again, Ramji moves west, to California, to join a left wing radical Muslim magazine. He starts his life with the woman he is sure that he is in love with. Here he tries to revisit his earlier, tenuous ties with political radicalism. this time with disastrous result. In California, he reunites not only with Rumina, but a former mentor, Darcy who is an infamous left wing journalist and icon back home in Dar es Salaam. It is he who twice changes the course of Ramji's life. It is he who puts Ramji on a left wing Muslim magazine.
Like other altruistic ventures on the sunny coast, though, this one too has its down side. Once again, against his better judgment and instincts, he ends up shehering a fanatical young man who has bombed a store in Michigan. In this bombing, however, there has been a death. The man is on the run, hoping to flee the country. Ramji's wife Rumina feels very sympathetic to the young man because she believes that he is innocent. Ramji knows is jealous too. In the end, the police break into get the young man who, by now, is holding Rumina's hostage. The standoff ends with his killing himself. He shoots himself in Rumina's apartment. This incident causes the sensitive Rumina so much distress that she vanishes. In fact, she is shattered and leaves home. Ramji loses his love a second time. At the end, Ramji is left once more with the sense of perpetual longing and impossible hope. The story ends in the bad, bad world of Los Angeles.

Ramji's personal journey, his failure in his relationships, his alienation and suffering are all moving. His story ends with a bittersweet and shocking episode. About this ending the comment of Pratima Agnihotri is apt. In A Cry and the Beloved Country she says:

Life is once again an excitement worth living when the predicament that had mocked him a quarter of century ago re-surfaces, once again. Just as Lucy Anne, accused of bombing, lands up in his room, and despite his valiant attempts to save her despite the pangs and question of conscience, it is the turn of Michael to destroy, perhaps permanently, the love nest. In a racially surcharged America, once again the 'native' is the loser, though he does hope that, just as Lucy Anne understood his kindness and moderation. Rumina would be back. ("A Cry and the Beloved Country". http://www.Fullhyderbad.com/script/profiles.php3).

M.G. Vassanji manages to hold interest while he describes the sixties. That part of the novel is probably the best portion. His imagery and description is cute, even if it is rather trite. Vassanji's protagonist goes through every rite of American passage possible, from losing his virginity to an older woman, facing racial
discrimination, to dabbling in Eastern mysticism. The entire section is exactly what the readers could call great literature, the one which would give the reader a lot of entertainment as well as knowledge. These types of incidents educate the reader to a great extent. Thus the matured reader looks for the next page of the novel with great deal of curiosity.

As the readers know that the quest for identity is one of the major issues in the novels of M.G. Vassanji. *Amriika* deals with this issue suitably. Here the author endeavours to explore the search for identity through the character of Ramji who tries his best to formulate his identity throughout the novel. It is very hard for him to achieve this aim. He finds numerous hurdles in his way.

As an immigrant Ramji comes in America in the hope of achieving the great American dream. The myriad facets he is exposed to overwhelm him. But he finds an America far different from the one he dreams about, one caught up in anti-Vietnam war demonstrations, revolutionary life styles, racial discrimination and spiritual quests. The reality he faces is very harsh and awful, and finally he realizes that America cannot appear as a dreamland. He becomes helpless like Nurdin Lalani of No New Land. He has no option except to keep on living there.

As Ramji gradually grows apart from his community of foreign students, he finds himself pulled by the tumultuous current of his times and swept into a world of fast changing sexual mores and values, of peace marches, religious cults and protest bombings that marked the wild United States of 1970s. Through the eyes of this University student, an immigrant, in Boston, Vassanji showsthe readers the portrait of nation. It is the stark picture of the America behind Elvis, Madonna, the Kennedys and Donna Reed. and not a beautiful one, at that. In such an atmosphere Ramji is obsessed with negative feeling. He feels that he has completely lost his identity due to displacement from Africa to America. His dream to belong appears as chalk from cheese. In the atmosphere of unfamiliarity, his existence has become a question. He feels that he is treated as an outsider. At every moment he suffers from discrimination and inequalities. Gradually therefore, he needs a space for existence. This is the
reason that Ramji goes to California in search of that space. But this search offers him his downfall.

When Ramji first arrives in Boston, he is clear about his political allegiances. In college, the sixties' activists look down on him for his lack of fervour. Soon his Gandhian sentiment is eroded, giving way to a demonstrating, proselytizing philosophy. He loses his political identity and starts suffering from confusion. We are unsure of what Ramji feels most passionately about. He cannot accept the anti-imperialist idealism that depicts the third world as the exploited victim. His middle path leaves him out in the cold: Ramji himself describes his pitiable condition. He admits, "I am so far behind them in how far I can go." But instead of reaching a balanced, logical moderation, his philosophy is ambiguous at the best of times. His change in sentiment seems to be prompted more by lust for the most attractive revolutionaries rather than epiphanic moment. He always lives in the world of ambiguity and doubt:

The reader's feeling is strengthened when Ramji drifts into a Hindu cult after sleeping with one of the members, despite realizing that the guruji of the ashram is fraud. "I wanted to get away", (P. 132) Ramji explains to a friend after his disenchantment. But his stay at the ashram also leads him to the realization that he does not want. "beatitude, infinite wisdom, and permanent enlightenment" (P. 144). We finally lands on the ground, but not with a thud. He floats back into his theorizing leftism. For the large part of the narrative one cannot be sure whether Ramji is aware of his own confusion. Being an immigrant, he suffers from identity crisis. He remains a wavering character. He is full of contradictions - religious, ethnic and personal, yet the readers never feel their full force. Maintaining a strategy, Vassanji's narrative is coldly detached. Ramji remains a stranger even after three hundred pages. Just as he remains a stranger to America, never really belonging, yet never feeling the need to leave. Initially secure with his identity, Ramji comes unglued under the pressure of political and civil society of Middle American, as it existed in the late sixties. The
story of Ramji obviously reflects that the journey undertaken by a migrant community in search of identity, belonging and security is *normally* shattered by doubts, challenges and never-ending feelings of despair.

M.G. Vassanji takes the dream of the 60s and tells a beautiful tale of a man's search for his roots. It explores the eternal quest for home. Like other novels of Vassanji, *Amriika* once again illustrates the complex nature of diasporic narrative. It must speak both to the adopted home and to the homeland. and in Vassanji case the medium or the bridge between the two is older diasporic home. fast Africa. In the present novel the protagonist has been shown struggling for home. He *hankers after* his desire for homely life. In starch of this he leaves his first wife and goes to California with Rumin.a. But when after a subtle rift Rumina leaves honie, Ramji is left once more homeless.

In this novel the United States is the canvas for M.G. Vassanji. But most of the time, the novel confines itself to the sub-culture of the Shamsi community. The historical details and the attempt at adding local colour do not seem central to the novel. In other words, America seems merely the settings of the novel. Though Vassanji has placed the main character of the novel in the United States, he has Ramji tied with an umbilical cord to Dar es Salaam, an African city that was Vassanji's home till 1970s.

M.G. Vassanji is caught between the home 'there' and 'here'. It becomes clear when one studies his novels and interviews. Asked about his sense of national identity, Vassanji observed:

"In my heart I am still very much an African, but I have lived in Canada for a long time and it feels like home. At some point in your life you realize there are several homes." *(Review of Amriika, http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.com/index.cfm)*.

In an interview with Sayantan Dasgupta, M.G. Vassanji expresses his views:
I am more comfortable defining myself in terms of my locale and city. That way Dar es Salaam would be probably the first place that figures as home. Every writer I think belongs to his city, to the streets and his urban landscape, assuming he is part of an urban ethos. Another place I could call home in that sense would be Toronto in Canada. ("Coming Home", The Statesman Review).

In another interview with Gene Carey. M.G. Vassanji says: Once I came to the United States I had a fear of losing my think with Tanzania. Then I feared going back because if I went back I feared losing the new world I had discovered. ("Ramji’s Amriika"). He further says: I went back to Tanzania in 1989 after 19 years. It is a part of my soul. The other part is India, which I visited for first time in 1993. My father has never been to India. the land of my forefathers.

Sometimes it seems that Ramji is Vassanji himself. Vassanji wanted to return to his homeland to teach after completing his Ph.D. but it was not possible for him. Like him Ramji also longs to go back to Tanzania to join in the political struggle but he is trapped in the ideals. Moreover, the America abundance in every possible way enthralls and mocks the atrophies back home. The siren call, in other words, so powerful that nothing can wean him off it – neither beloved grandmother's death, nor the political upheavals. Discussing Ramji’s situation Vassanji says: He has guilt feelings about not returning back to Channel hi knowledge into politics but the idea remains the back of his mind. If learning about radicalism is the first irony in the book, the second one is realization that in America he is still considered a coloured person.

Memory plays a very significant role in the novels of M.G. Vassanji. Either in The Gunny Sack or in The Book of Secrets, it is memory that has got a significant place. In The In-Between World of Vikram Lall and No New Land from the same memory. Vassanji’s engagement with the past is praiseworthy. Unlike the archives, where the past is already digested as the raw material for history writing, the past here is a past of memory. Vassanji’s engagement with the past is praiseworthy. Unlike the
archives, where the past is already digested as the raw material for history writing. The past here is a past of memory. For him it is an aesthetic necessity, and it has great sacral value.

Decades later in a changed America, having recently left a marriage and suburban existence, an older Ramji, passionately in love, finds himself drawn into a set of circumstances which hold terrifying reminders of the past and its unanswered questions. In this context Makarand Paranjape observes:

Vassanji’s obsession with the past, with the history of his small community, is wellreflected in the tanga painting that he gives to the host family; it bears a simple but telling legend: "Wayfarer look back." In a sense, this is what Vassanji has been doing all along." ("Looking Back", Online Edition of the Hindu).

Told in a spiral fashion, the story of Ramji moves forth through remembrance, which he re-lives time and again, and his affairs of all sorts. With the help of the history Vassanji has tried to explore his own past and at the same time the past of Asian African community in East Africa and America. He has beautifully woven the past with the present. He has beautifully woven the past with the present. He tries to discuss "how history affects the present and how personal and public history overlap." ("Ambivalent Affiliations and the Postcolonial Condition: The Fiction of M.G. Vassanji", World Literature Today, P. 279).

In Postcolonial times, the Indian community in East Africa got a strange position. Its condition became pitiable. It was marginalized by the postcolonial regime. The members of this community were forced into the international diaspora. The second phase of migration started in the sixties. Some members of the above mentioned community later undergo a second migration from East Africa towards Europe, Canada and North America. Vassanji is then concerned how these migrations affect the lives and identities of his characters, an issue that is personal to him as well. The Indian multiculturalism is very important. Vassanji says that he tells stories about marginalized people in questions be a family of Jews in New York a forming sector in India. He says that he had people who have moved from Nova Scotia to Toronto who
tell him that they can appreciate his stories because they speak to them of their experiences. Again it is one of marginalization. *(Electronic Magazine. 12th Feb. 2004. by Ray Deonandun)*.

And indeed it turns out that M.G. Vassanji’s latest book, quaintly entitled *Amriika*, begins its fashionable *diasporic* journey with yet another *Whitman* quotation from the poem *Facing West from California’s Shores*. What happens, metaphorically, when an immigrant stands on California shores. "the circle almost circled"? He cannot help but look homeward and seek to recall the original purpose of his journey.

At this land’s end he must reassemble his memories, reassess both the strength and fragility of new relationships he has made. The novel *Amriika* is concerned with precisely these troubled issues as they arise in the mind of its protagonist, Ramji. In this sense, it is very much a rites-of-passage book.

Ramji, from the eclectic Shamsi Muslim Cutch-Gujarati community of Tanzania, arrives as an innocent abroad. The novel records his initiation into student life in Boston in the world United States of the 1970s.

Almost immediately, we are vouchsafed a poignant glimpse of our hero being seduced by Ginnie, wife of his "American host". When Ramji learns Ginnie has termina cancer. she comes to embody for him the brave spirit of middle America, cheerful, generous and enthusiastic even in the face of imminent death.

The usual campus entanglements, both romantic and radical, follow. Various American beauties involve Ramji in marches against the Vietnam war, with Indian gurus and so forth. Science is represented too (with gedanken disastrously misspelt gedunken!) in the form of a charismatic, wheel-chained physics professor who enables Ramji to see himself as Schroedinger’s Cat "smeared" between cultures.

All very exciting, but in time. Ramji finds himself adrift in middle-age and caught in a doomed marriage. Twin children and much acrimony later, the American Dream appears to have lost its *savour*. 
Luckily for Ramji, he is introduced at this nadir to a mysterious young woman from Zanzibar in whom he finds a soulmate. Since it's America we're in, Ramji swiftly cuts loose from family ties and whooshes off to — you've guessed. California.

There he reunites not only with Rumina, his love, but a former mentor, Darcy, who puts him to work on a left-wing magazine. Like other altruistic ventures on the sunny West Coast, though, this one too has its down-side.

A fanatical young man, on the run after a bombing, shoots himself in Ramji's apartment. This incident causes the sensitive Rumina so much distress that she vanishes. And at the end, Ramji is left once more with that sense of perpetual lunging and impossible hope signaled by the very word "America".

Despite this melodramatic finale, Amriika is mostly straight, unvarnished reportage-diasporic reminiscence with a great deal of a authentic period detail. It also reads like autobiography, slipping from third to first person at various places in the text.

Vassanji, of course, makes a point of insisting that everything in the novel is "fictional", but I cannot agree. The incidents may be fictional, but the note of personal experience is unmistakable.

It is America, capricious cornucopia, that emerges as the most irresistible character in this book—not only Ramji's hut Vassanji's Circle.

Some may find the novel a little trite, especially after the layered and lyrical Books of Secrets, yet there will be others. like me, who are won over by the way it openly, unsecretively, presents a by-now inescapable worldview: "Everything was America now, everything would be America. You could say that word, Amriika, a hundred times without repeating it once … that was the wonder of it." Whitman is dead, long live Vassanji.
To conclude, *Amriika* magnificently tackles "the predicament of in-between societies". (*Making a Difference: Canadian Multicultural Literature, P. 335*). It is a fantastical multicultured reminiscence with a great deal of authentic details. It also reads like in autobiography, slipping from third person to first autobiography, slipping from third person to first person at various places in the text. Vassanji, the great writer, of course, makes a point of insisting that everything in the novel is fictitious, but one cannot agree the incident may be fictional, but the note of personal experience is there. Here the typical Third World Characters, and their cries, inhibit the hyphenated identities and spaces that Vassanji, a literary member of the Indian diaspora explores.

Thus after humbly commenting on the great novel *Amriika*, its time to look into the next novel in this chapter which is called *The Assassin’s Song* written by the same writer M.G. Vassanji. These two novels have many commonalities to their credit between them. Actually, the readers become very big fans of M.G. Vassanji’s writings ever since they read *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall*. They are surprised that his name rarely features in discussions of the top contemporary Indian writes. This could partly be because Vassanji has never lived in India and his genealogy is a complicated one described by, Wikipedia as "an African-Indian-Canadian novelist". Africa exerts a powerful influence over M.G. Vassanji and his subject of much of his writings, though he has not lived there since 1970. Vassanji was born in Kenya, grew up in Tanzania and has been a resident of Launche since 1978.

Here before touching the novel *The Assassin’s Song* it is important to discuss the recent novel of M.G. Vassanji “The Magic of Saida” which deals with a similar story.

More than half way through M.G. Vassanji’s new novel *The Magic of Saida*, the protagonist Kamal Punja is horribly unwell in a small hotel in Kilwa, Tanzania. Having lived in Canada for 35 years and unused to the more pliable standards of hygiene in the country he is visiting – the country of his birth and childhood – Kamal has been fortifying himself with vaccinations, insect repellents and prophylactics. However, a single, unsterilized glass of water has done him in, and now
he is **gripped** by fever, **ailments** of the stomach and nervous system. "Africa invaded him, reclaimed him once again," the narrator—a **publisher** named Martin—who has just made **Kamal**’s acquaintance—tells the readers.

By now, though, the reader knows that **Kamal** has been invaded and reclaimed in more than one sense. A middle-aged doctor with a family and a successful practice in **Edmonton**, has been drawn back to Africa by the **memory** of a girl named Saida, whom he knew and loved decades earlier. Arriving in Kilwa, it is almost as if the intervening years of his life fall away and he is pulled into **time**’s vortex: into his own personal history as the son of an Indian father (who **vanished** when Kamal was a child) and a Swahili **mother**, and the complex history of **Tanzania**, populated by an assortment of local and immigrant communities. The result is an intricate, **moving**—though also at times, meandering—narrative: **Kamal**’s recollections run alongside stories about his great-grandfather **Punja** who had journeyed to Africa from **Gujarat** in the 19th century, and an old poet named **Mzee Omari** who **may** in a **moment** of weakness have betrayed his **people** to the Germans who invaded East Africa in the 1880s.

These movements across **space** and **time** should come as no surprise to anyone familiar with **Vassanji**’s earlier books. To read the work of this graceful, perceptive writer is to be constantly reminded of the famous last **line** of *The Great Gatsby*, "**So we beat on. boats against the current, borne ceaselessly back into the past.**" In the last two decades Vassanji has **written** novels set in Tanzania, Kenya, Canada and India and featuring characters with a range of life experiences, backgrounds and **personal** compulsions; but in some way or the other, all his books deal with how the past operates upon the present.

The theme manifest itself in an **examination** of how childhood experiences can define, and sometimes petrify, a life. In *The Magic of Saida*, Kamal feels like his childhood "had been some **conjuror**’s creation, with the ability to change shape, parts of it to **disappear** like smoke"—and yet, it’s notable that here (as in other Vassanji novels such as *The In-Between World of Vikram Lull* and *The Assassin’s Song*) the
childhood sections have more clarity, more fearful vividness than the adult sections do.

A boy's sense of wonder and mystery are adeptly expressed in a such passages as the one where little Kamal thinks he is being harassed by the old poet's invisible djinn. ("Did Mzee Omari keep the dreadful Idris in a bottle?" he wonders. "Did he come out of it like a blue is trauma: one gets a tangible sense of how devastated he is when his mother sends him to Dar es Salaam to live with his father's relatives ("But I'm an African" he protests. "I don't speak Indian, I don't eat Indian! They eat Desi and they smell!") and by the consequent sundering of his relationship with Saida.

In the researcher's own Savourite Vassanji book, the "in-between" Vikram Lall – an Indian who grows up in a Kenya torn by anti-colonial insurgency – is similarly haunted by memories of his childhood friend Annie, a British girl who was murdered by Mau Mau rebels. Through Vikram's reminiscences the readers come to understand how his character has been shaped by that distant tragedy (the book’s epigraph is T.S. Elliot's line "Who is the third who walks always beside you?") but the readers also see how his becoming a political power-broker later in life affects – even if in a small way – his country's destiny. Time and again, Vassanji shows how cultural and national conflicts affect individual lives, and how the subsequent actions of those individuals in turn shape larger histories.

The circularity of events in an equally important motif of his work – history as tragic farce, destined to coil back on itself no matter how much one tries to stop it. Those who don't learn from the past are doomed to repeat it, goes the familiar aphorism, but one of the strengths of Vassanji's writing is how he demonstrates – not in a gratuitously cynical way but through insightful stories about specific individuals – that even sensitive, self-aware people can become trapped in a skein of historical wrongs. Without giving too much away, a climatic revelation in The Magic of Saida implicates Kamal in exactly the sort of moral inaction that had adversely shaped his own life.
“In this work, the present, is always interacting with the past,” Vassanji agrees when the readers meet at the India International Centre, Delhi. A beat of silence and then a little chuckle: "But maybe that's the physicist in me!" (He specialized in nuclear physics at the University of Pennsylvania before embarking on a career as an editor and writer.) "There is a feeling of entrapment by history - one little decision and a whole wave comes crashing down on you. This is especially true of Africa. hut even in India one thinks of all those who are trapped by the violent memories of Partition". He is so soft-spoken. that he is briefly concerned his tape recorder will be ineffective. Yet, as l soon realize, the gentle voice has a steady firmness.

Descended from the Khoja community of Gujarat, M.G. Vassanji grew up in Kenya and Tanzania. and went to the US to study at age 20. His first novel The Gummy Sack (set in the East Africa of his childhood, with a protagonist of Indian ethnicity, Salim Juma, delving into his ancestral past) was published in 1989; there have been nine more books, including two short-story collections. Africa has been the subject of much of his best writing, including The Book of Secrets and The In-Between World of Mkkram Lall, both of which won the prestigious Giller Prize. Clearly, that continent exercises a powerful hold over his imagination even though he hasn’t lived there since 1970.

Though his characters tend to have very complicated childhoods, he speaks fondly of his own youth, of the revolutionary movements in Africa in the 60s and the politics of equality and non-alignment - a heady, optimistic time for an impressionable boy. This perspective - of an insider, fully steeped in a culture - differentiates his work from that of the most famous Indian-origin author who has written about Africa, V.S. Naipaul. As Vassanji himself puts it, Naipaul in Africa is an observer. “He visits it and writes about 'them', which is fine – it’s an ancient tradition in travel writing. But I cannot write like that about my part of Africa, or even about India, because I identify directly with them.” Even today, if he visits Tanzania and someone calls him a foreigner, he points to his skin and asks: do I look white to you?” Being able to do that confidently, despite having been away for decades, is a big thing. The language has a certain tilt to it, which allows you to banter” – perhaps
I'm imagining it, but Vassanji's voice takes on a new cadence here; he seems to croon rather than speak these words - "and when you can talk like that you know you belong. I still tend to swear in Swahili!" (P.37).

A Canadian who is also an African as well as an Indian? Hut Vassanji has a case for adopting an even more improbable duality – that of a Hindu and a Muslim, in his travelogue-history A Place Within: Rediscovering India, he describes a founding legend of his ancestors, the Khojas. wherein a Muslim holy man came to a village in western Gujarat and joined Krishna devotees in the traditional garba dance. As a child, Vassanji was enthralled by gimus verses and songs from the Suli tradition – and learnt much about music and mythology from them. Though he is agnostic, there are strong elements of mysticism in his work: the story of the poet Omari's petulant djinn in The Magic of Saida, for instance. or an episode where a magician plays detective, handling out "truth-telling" medicines to people. "Mysticism is basically the meaning of life," he says, "it's like theoretical physics. it asks the same questions about life and death, and I'm empathetic to it; when I see, a woman at a temple, I see my mother." (P.43).

M.G. Vassanji's syncretic upbringing – built on Hindu and Islamic streams of thought – must have made it especially disturbing when he visited the land of his ancestors for what was effectively the first time in 1993, and found he had landed right in the midst of the post-Babri Masjid communal riots. "Yes, that was bothersome," he says with typical understatement, "I didn't see why I had to deal with this scar of the Partition, which was never my experience – when my grandparents left India, there was no Partition. But these divisions get forced upon you" (P.67).

Though the discovery of India is an ongoing project for him (A Place Within ends elliptically, with the line "But for now I must stop here, conclude this token of pilgrimage"), there is no lack of other things that he can engage with and write about; he is currently working on a similar travel book about Tanzania. "The texture of that country is often lost in snapshot reportage and I want to depict it as a real, human place – not an AIDS, war and hunger place." And of course, he will be a part of the narrative.
Writer and physicist; Kenyan, Tanzanian and Gujarati; Indian, African and Canadian; Hindu and Muslim; agnostic and interested in mysticism. With all these identities informing each other, it is easy to see why Vassanji prefers to use his initials rather than the names Moyez Gulamhussein, which might mark him as belonging to a specific community or region. It is no surprise too that a recurring theme of his work is the difficulty of knowing theme of his work is the difficulty of knowing where we are from and what forces have combined to make the readers what the readers are. (Perhaps this makes it piquantly fitting that he keeps gravitating back towards Africa, which – in the long view of history – is where all humans originated.) His best writing builds on the knowledge that people and communities – along with their allegiances – shift continuously over time: for all the Indians in his novels whose families moved to Africa, there are equally reminders that the Sidis of Singh are the descendants of Africans who made a journey in the opposite direction centuries earlier.

There is a thorough observation in The Magic of Saita, one that might have come from any of Vassanji’s books: under the Idi Amin regime, the readers are reminded, people like Kamal would be viewed as foreigners, not “real” Africans- and yet, Kamal’s great-grandfather Punja had called himself “Sawahil” and fought the Germans for his adopted country. While Idi Amin himself had once fought for the British against the Kenyans. “Nothing was straightforward.” In a world that appears to be shrinking but where distinctions between original dwellers and “outsiders” continue to be made, Vassanji’s body of work is a gentle reminder of the fluidity of history – and of the ability of an individual to belong to many places and be many things at the same time. In this way communal riots is the main subject in these two novels. Now the researcher wants to attract the attention of the readers on the novel, The Assassin’s Song

This is M.G. Vassanji’s magnificent novel which provides further proof of his unique, wide ranging and profound genius. It is a shining study of the conflict between ancient loyalties and modern desires. In this novel, Karsan Dargawala tells the story of the medieval shrine of pirbaba and his betrayal of its legacy. But in his attempt to settle accounts quickly he jumps into a tale that spans centuries. The song
of the title refers to the centuries old tradition of singing mystical and devotional poetry at such shrines.

Vassanji is highly respected in literary circles in Canada, with many accolades, including (twice) the Giller Prize. But unlike another Canadian resident, Rohinton Mistry, he doesn't have the sort of following in India that would place him even in Tier II of High-Profile Authors. His books aren't widely available here: off hand, the researcher doesn't recall seeing any of his early novels (The Gunny Sack, No New Land, The Book of Secrets) in a Delhi bookstore. This is strange, for his work — marked by elegant, lucid writing and movingly restrained characterizations — can be a very satisfying alternative for readers who recycled plots that deal in the most hackneyed ways with problems faced by immigrants, the Rushdie influence taken to tiresome extremes, resulting in a stream of overwrought prose (by writers who don't have the control over the language, or the understanding of its basic rules, that Rushdie does). To be fair, these allegations are not as relevant now as they were a few years ago, for IWE in general has become more dynamic, wide-ranging and less self-conscious, but they still hold some water.

Nor is it the case that Vassanji deals with themes the readers won't usually find in Indian writings in English. In fact, the phrase "the burden of exile", so often used in the context of the work of diaspora writers, applies to the predicament of some of his characters. But his handling of these themes is careful and nuanced. And he never oversimplifies people or situations. Ambivalence is the key to his work — running through his stories is the delicate (and inconvenient) question: What can the readers ever really know about themselves, their motivations, their choices, the accumulation of incidents and influences that define them over a lifetime? And if they can't know themselves, what then of understanding anyone else, even the people they are closest to? This also means that elements of his writing can be frustrating, especially when some threads are deliberately left untied (as they would be in real life) — an important character disappearing, for instance, and the reader never learning anything about him again, outside of conjecture.
In the aftermath of the brutal violence that gripped Western India in 2002, Karsan Dargawalla, heir to pirboag the shrine of a mysterious, medieval Sufi—begins to tell the story of his family. Despite his father’s pleas, Karsan leaves home behind for Harvard, and eventually, marriage takes place and career grows. Not until the tragedy strikes, both in Karsan’s adopted home in Canada and in pirbaag, is he drawn back across thirty years of separation and silence to discover what, if anything is left far him in India.

M.G. Vasanji’s latest novel "The Assassin’s Song", which is the first of his books to be set principally in India (though its protagonist spends more than 30 years in the US in an attempt to cut himself off from his roots). Unlike The In-Between World of Vikram Lull, which had a chronological narrative, this one moves around in time. The novel’s present is 2002, which is when the narrator, Karsan Dargawalla, returns to the village of his childhood following the terrible communal riots in Gujarat, but the readers are also taken as far back as the begins to grasp his responsibilities as Lord and Keeper of the shrine after his father (therefore, an avatar of God).

Growing up, he struggles with this burden of divinity. After losing the opportunity to be coached by a former first-class cricketer because his position as the "gaadi-varas" must come first, it’s understandable that he is deeply affected by the Biblical story of Abraham preparing to sacrifice his son Isaac to the Almighty: glumly, he refuses to participate in a wishing ritual because “Isaac didn’t matter He couldn’t wish for anything.” Karsan’s parents are constant reminders of the path he is expected to follow, but other adult figures play equally important, and perhaps longer-lasting, roles: the companionable truck driver who brings him stacks of newspapers and magazines, a constant flow of news about the outside world; a Christian teacher with African antecedents, whom Karsan briefly hero-worships; an agent of the National Patriotic Youth Party, obsessed with restoring the glories, real and imagined, of the Vedic Civilization. Here as in his other novels, Vasanji is a wonderfully perceptive chronicler of how childhood events and impressions can continue to influence character long after they have been forgotten at a conscious level.
More than halfway through the book comes Karsan’s big decision to go to the US to study at Harvard on a scholarship, effectively turning his hack on his parents and the Pirbaag shrine. Tellingly, his life in America – including college, a decade spent as a family man living in an idyllic suburb, followed by tragedy and a subsequent hermitlike existence – takes less than 100 pages to get through: the effect here is akin to the story about Vishnu instructing Narada in the ways of Maya I illusion through a firsthand experience of the impermanence of the material world. Eventually Karsan does return to fulfil his spiritual calling, but there is no easy resolution, or even a sense of a story coming full circle.

Among other things, The Assassin’s Song is about the danger of taking a neutral position in a world that demands certainties. The faith followed by Karsan’s family, the keepers of the Pir’s flame, is neither Hindu nor Muslim, but this doesn’t count for much in the heat of communal riots, when convenient labels have to be put on everything. And the friction between Karsan and his younger brother Mansoor (who has become an orthodox Muslim and is wanted by police for questioning) recalls a similar clash of ideologies between two brothers in Kiran Nagarkar’s God’s Little Soldier, but the lines are not as clearly drawn in this case. The Assassin’s Song is sparer and more compact in every way than Nagarkar’s opus, which it resembles in places.

Intermittently, the book also visits the late 13th century, when a mysterious Sufi named Nur Fazal arrived at the gates of Patan and came to be worshipped as a holy man–becoming the Pir Bawa whose legacy would, centuries later, fall on Karsan’s shoulders. The readers never learn enough about this figure, which is part of the point: history repeats itself in strange ways and the contours of a life may be determined by nebulous, barely understood events that took place hundreds of years ago. What the readers are finally left with is a portrait of a life wasted by the struggle between duty and individuality, between faith and pragmatism. Karsan is much a hollow man, swept along by forces outside his control, as the protagonist of Vassanji’s last book.
M.G. Vassanji is one of the unsung greats of African literature. An Ismaili Muslim of Gujarati heritage, born in Kenya and raised in Tanzania, he attended the University of Nairobi before winning a scholarship to MIT to study nuclear physics. In 1978 he moved to Canada to work at the Ontario nuclear research facility. He began his literary career two years later. So far, his writing has focused on the experience of south Asians in east Africa. This mainly merchant community has been around since the 1850s, but trade has existed between the two continents since at least the 13th century. It was a Gujarati sea pilot who led Vasco da Gama from Kenya to India in 1498.

This long history gives Vassanji’s fiction a fascinating depth of field. In the Gunny Sack, published in 1989, a Tanzanian Asian is bequeathed a sack full of ancient mementos, which provokes a gallery of stories. The book won a Commonwealth Writer’s Prize. A stream of novels has since followed, most recently The In-Between World of Vikram Lull (2004), which tells the story of a young Indian who grows up in Mau Mau Kenya and then moves to Toronto, where he is numbered "one of Africa’s most corrupt men". Typically, Vassanji’s books dramatise the doubly alienated plight of the east African Asian (alienated from both Africa and India). To this has gradually been added description of Asian experience in Canada and the United States.

His work shares some aspects with north America-based Indian writers such as Rohinton Mistry and Bharati Mukherjee. It also bears comparison with the “British wing” of the Indian/Pakistani diaspora, from Salman Rushdie to rising stars such as Tahmima Anam and Nikita Lalwani. But Vassanji’s writing is closest to the knotted postcolonial experience described, albeit in very different ways, by Caribbean Asian writers such as VS Naipaul and David Dabydeen. In much postcolonial writing, cultural identity is presented as fluid but also recursive to heritage, as if one could only tell one’s own story by knowing the skin of one’s neighbour. With his new novel The Assassin’s Song, Vassanji has met this issue of difference-based self-labelling head on.
The main cultural background of the novel involves the history of Muslims in the Indian state of Gujarat. The story takes the reader from a 13th-century village there to the United States in the 1960s and Canada in the 1980s. The readers move back to Gujarat in 2002, when brutal Hindu-Muslim riots took place. After Kashmir, Gujarat remains the most communally sensitive region in India, as witnessed by a resurgence of violence there last month.

The narrator Karsan's father is the sahib of Pirbaag, lord and keeper of an ancient Sufi shrine in Gujarat. His village home is overlooked by the mausoleum of the mystic Pir Bawa, around whose magical activities the shrine came into being in 1260. Although the teenage Karsan wishes the distinction would simply go away -- he just wants to play cricket -- he must succeed his father. In due course he must take on the mantle and learn the secret of the shrine. This is concentrated in the speaking of a “bol”, a mantra passed from father to son. The position does not just involve guardianship; to be sahib is to be avatar of a cosmic force, in which Sikhs and Hindus as well as Muslims believe. Pir Dawa himself was a syncretic figure who mixed occultism with Islam and the classical Hinduism of his once-welcoming Gujarati hosts.

"But now the shrine lies in ruins, a victim of the violence that so gripped our state recently, an orgy of murder and destruction of the kind the people euphemistically call 'riots'. Only the rats visit the Sufi now, to root among the ruins. His father is dead and so is his mother. And his brother militantly calls himself a Muslim and is wanted for questioning regarding a horrific crime." (P.87).

The novel reveals its forthcoming action in a proleptic first chapter. The readers learn of Karsan's childhood, and see him accepted by Harvard. The novel then shifts register to describe, with high comedy, the experience of being an Indian immigrant at a predominantly white US university in the 1960s. Karsan falls in love with hippy Marge, studies English poetry, gets his PhD, and moves to British Columbia to work as an academic. He forgets, or thinks he has forgotten, the bol that is the key to his identity.
He loses touch with his father, who is left distraught by Karsan's rejection of his heritage. But devotees of the sect, whom Karsan meets in urban America, pull at the string of faith, being all too ready to accept him at face value as the incarnation of the cosmos. When Karsan returns to India, he finds Pirbaag despoiled and his brother on the run from the police. Eventually he remembers the bol and takes his place as guardian of the ruined shrine.

The readers never know the exact words of the bol, only that it illuminates a connection between present-day Ismailis and the medieval Shia sect of the Assassins. "who disdained the outer forms of worship and the Muslim laws of Sharia for inner spiritual truths", and were also feared for their "penchant for murdering their enemies with impudent and terrifying facility". (P.68).

Although he has returned to his heritage, Karsan is still left asking the same existential questions - who am I? Am I real? - than an individual from any culture on earth might ask. Making a general virtue of its own exceptionalism, The Assassin's Song is thus both particular and universal, which is one of the marks of great literature. Historical novel, bildungsroman and terrorist thriller all rolled into one, it is above all a celebration of religious tolerance, which is something more necessary now than ever in Gujarat and elsewhere.

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. Multicultural consciousness has traveled a long distance from the colonial to the post colonial. The emigrants haunted by some sense of loss reel under the agony of a lost home and create one through imagination. To quote Salman Rushdie "...we will, in short create fictions, not actual cities or villages but invisible ones. imaginary home land, Indians of the mind." (P.45) The impact of diasporic experiences on their psyche depends on their belonging a settler-colony or an invader-colony to the generation they belong to and above all their reason of settling in a foreign land. When these experiences are expressed in literature there emerge writers who search for their roots in the lands of their ancestors; those who discover meaning and a sense of belonging in their own
landscape and those who reject their society and prefer the fate of the provincial exile. Vassanji belongs to the second category.

The Assassin's Song is set at a thirteenth-century Shrine (dargahy) of a mysterious Sufi who had come as a refugee to the kingdom of Gujarat from the war-torn Central Asia. The story is narrated by the heir to the shrine, Karsan Dargawala who grows up in rapidly changing post-independence India. The shrine is neither Hindu nor Muslim and the novel is in a sense about the burden of tradition. The song of the title refers to the centuries old tradition of singing mystical devotional poetry at such shrines, and the story is told in the aftermath of the bloody communal violence of 2002, in which the shrine was destroyed. 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." Vassanji, an Ismaili Muslim, here draws on his own experience of belonging to a small religious community. The novel moves forward and backward in time with help of a style of narration called pendulum way. The threads are woven together impeccably into a yarn that is blended in colours of personal and cultural history of India. The story begins with a nostalgic note which is diffused in the entire text. The narrator Karsan’s emotional bondage with his God, his father and his country is so strong that after a span of thirty long years he returns to his home in Haripur as the saheb – the Lord and Keeper of a shrine of Pirbaag. What surprises the readers is the fact that his long association in the US does not come in his way when he returns to his home. His roots. The readers are forced to think on some questions- What is that makes people leave their land? What is it that drawn them back to their country?

Karsan Dargawalla, is the eldest son of a Saheb of Pirbaag, a Shrine of a thirteenth century mystic, a Sufi called Nur Fazal. Affectionately called Pir Bawa, he was a wanderer and centuries ago he came wandering to Gujarat. His mother tongue was Persian but he gave his teachings in Gujarati. The shrine is visited by men of all communities including foreigners. Bapuji, Karsan's father is like a God to the people. His devotion to the shrine has made him a man of the masses and his family's share of his attention was diverted to the devotees of the shrine. Karsan on his eleventh
birthday is for the first time introduced to the questions related to human existence
that are terrifying and lead to "loneliness big and terrifying enough to make you want
to weep in the dark" (P.2) Karsan dreads to be the successor, the goddi- varus of the
Pirbaag shrine. He, like any other boy wants to pursue the career of his choice and
does not want to be a God or His avatar.

Karsan's mother and father have an indelible mark on him and are the source
of his inspiration. One day Bapuji, his father, introduces him to the legacy of Pir
Bawa, recognizes him as the chosen one. Karsan's is weary about becoming God to
the worshippers- the Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, and mystics who visit the shrine. His
greatest regret is that his destiny is predetermined. 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 becomes anew-among people of
your age... to think clearly, for the first time about your own life to search for
knowledge" (P.201) 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 demarcates that they occupy a space of exile
and cultural solitude, a third space, as termed by Homi Bhabha. "To this is added the
global experience which is the reason behind the changing trend in diasporic creative
writing. The Diaspora writing depicts the experience of encountering a differing mode
of living and the cultural adaptation is the only solution but this brings in cultural
shock. All familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse are lost. New citizens are
expected to embrace the culture and language of the host land. If not they are losers
themselves. Yet the attempt a further complicated by the multicultural ambivalence
where immigrants wish to stay as permanent residents but emotionally they are
forever forlorn. This creates a push on both sides.
The question of returning from Cambridge comes to the mind of Karsan 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 that Sura P. Rath calls “Trishanku” The anxiety of the diaspora finds vent in three dimensions- the conative, the cognitive and the behavioral. Karsan often dreams about people at home who are granting him freedom from responsibility. This shows the guilt in the mind of the migrants like Karsan who have disowned their inheritance and their people for the sake of their ambition. His dreams are approving his own actions that are actually disapproved by his heart. The guilt and alienation create havoc in his life. 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) but is ready to accept the loneliness in return for the ”freedom and exhilaration” (P. 7-17).

The teachers of Karsan’s college also do not have an attitude of assimilation. They leave no chance of looking down upon the minorities. Edward Said aptly points out in Culture and Imperialism that when a minority is judged the difference is an essentially inferior one by western standards. When Karsan discovers a similarity between the extended metaphors in Metaphysical poetry and the same in Ginans, the verses of the Khoja tradition, the professor says that Donne wrote for sophisticated public but Indian poetry is meant for simple, uneducated folk.” Such statements make him furious and his anger finds vent in his irritable behaviour/The loneliness adds to this and has an adverse affect on the him. Despair sets in the mind which leads to arrogance. As the excitement of coming to the US vanishes, an unbearable emptiness and a feeling of rebellion sets in. His attitude towards the fellow students changes. As a reaction, when they keep the volume on their stereos loud during, Karsan’s studies, he sings ginans to their irritation.

The tormented mind leads to abnormal actions. Often he is drunk, one day he pinches a book from a shop. All his friends begin to fear him but at saner moments
Karsan speaks to them, and apologises. The friends understand his pangs of loneliness and his suffering and advise him to go home but he thinks "Go home and become a God?" With time his father's letters becomes less frequent. The mental torment of alienation and loneliness thwarts his mind and in frenzy he jumps out of the window. Counseling sessions reveal his fears, his memories, jealousies and contradictions. In an impulse, he even renounces his status as gaddi-varas of Pirbaag and reveals his reasons for doing so. He writes. “Bapuji, forgive me for being honest; you were never there to listen to or notice what your children. even wife desired. You lived in your own world…How I missed having a real father!” (P.57).

The diaspora are situated in a complex space between two worlds and two cultures. They can neither forget the culture they have come from, nor can they fully assimilate into and be acculturalised by the culture they have adopted because they cannot subvert their identities totally. The complex situation of the postcolonial perception found in their writings is reminiscent of Janus, the Greek god with two faces, one looking backward and the other forward.

M.G. Vassanji in this novel unfolds the strength of Indian philosophy and its impact on Karsan Dargawalla is evident. The religion of the Sufi shrine is ideal where devotees are from all communities. The letters of Bapuji are epistles. Bapuji never mentions anything about missing him because he keeps restraint over his love and concern as he practices detachment which is essential part of his philosophy. As the sahib of Pirbaag, he teaches Karsan that family and relationships are mere samsara- "a cage keeping you in this world, chained to the cycle of births". Karsan longs to hear from his father but he known it is not possible. Bapuji’s letters reveal that the self enfoldment is an integral part of Indian philosophy and it is good that Karsan even in a foreign land is trying to understand himself. The Upanishads recommend it as truth is within the readers and the purpose of gurus like Pir Bawa is to show the right path of self revelation. Karsan's grooming has giving him the ability to understand himself and he puts question to his father that shows the grown from within. Yet even as he succeeds in his "ordinary" life-marrying and having a son, becoming a professor in suburbs British Columbia-his heritage haunts him in unexpected ways.
The desire to understand one's culture the mentor of one's identity attracts a migrant to his roots. He tries to reestablish 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 consequently his wife leaves and marries 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. The destruction of the Shrine symbolizes the annexation of the negative forces over the positive the truth. Unable to bear this tragedy, his father passes away. His return to his homeland and towards his inheritance shows how strong the impact of spiritually was on Karsan. The process of self realization finally instills confidence 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 our country. 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 and his brother Manor has taken the militant course, he realizes "The role which I once spumed, I must assume" (p. 367). On returning to the Shrine Karsan tries to take care of his younger brother Mansoor who has joined the militant group. 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 (p. 367). He hears numerous stories of woes from the survivors at the relief camps. The conditions are at the lowest ebb. There is no prayer call from the mosque. But Karsan's presence soon strengthens the confidence of the people. On the fourth day the singing of gunam resumes. Mansoor is brought back by the imam of the Mosque 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 by hand or sleeve away. as I listen in sympathy and utter a Messing a
part of me detaches and stands away, observing, asking, are you real? (The Assassin’s Song. P.23).

The spiritual aspect gives The Assassin’s Song a weight 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 recognizes 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. They in a way prove that their roots are deep and that wherever we are our culture still prevails over the forces of disparity, it dominates our lives and our umbilical chord never gets dissociated.