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Style and Language in M. G. Vassanji's *The Assassin's Song*

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*"You Taught Me Language: And My Profit On't
Is, I Know How To Curse." The Tempest, 1611.*

Colonialism and Decolonization

In the history of colonialism and decolonization, the literary dimension is apparent not only in the themes and preoccupations of literary producers, but also and more profoundly in their chosen medium of expression, English. Literary writers use English language as an instrument to convey or to express widely differing cultural experiences and also in their struggle against decolonizing the mind or, as Raja Rao says in his famous Foreword to *Kanthapura*:

... to convey in a language that is not one's own the spirit that is one's own ... we cannot write like the English. We should not. We cannot write only as Indian's. We have grown to look at the large world as part of us. Our method of expression therefore has to be a dialect which will some day prove to be as distinctive and colorful as the Irish or American. Time alone will justify it."

Colonial Language in the Hands of the Colonialized

There is support for Rao's statement. The empire started writing back with vengeance. Postcolonial literature has given rise to Diaspora Literature. One's affection towards one's homeland and attachment towards one's culture, tradition, religion and language saw the emergence of Diaspora Literature.

Vassanji and Diaporic Literature

Diasporic literature discourse often incorporates expressions of alienation, powerlessness, longing for their homeland, loss of identity and subjugation. In immigrant writings, language has become a marker of identity and a carrier of culture. M.G.Vassanji believes that,

I have a much more aggressive view towards language; if we were invaded, then I now see myself as part of an invading force, or part of an invading culture from the Third world, which is now helping to transform the cultures that invaded us. So what I do is use the language, but change

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it and add on to the literary traditions here. What I attempt is to bridge different literary traditions. I see the whole process as much more positive. (M.G. Vassanji's interview with Chelva, 1991: 24)

An Analysis of Style and Modes in *The Assassin's Song*

The purpose of this paper is to examine the style and modes of discourse employed by M. G. Vassanji in his *The Assassin's Song* to reveal his perspectives on religion and the diasporic experience.

M. G. Vassanji was born to Indian Muslim parents in Kenya and was raised in Tanzania. His ties to his Indian roots were snapped because of this constant relocation. He considers himself as an outsider in his ancestral land, and in his birthplace he is considered an outsider. His sense of alienation is further intensified when he decides to live in Canada.

Before migrating to Canada in 1978, he attended the MIT and the University of Pennsylvania, where he specialized in theoretical nuclear physics. Though he has come far away from his homeland, he journeys back through his literary works.

Vassanji is the author of six novels and two collections of short stories. His works have appeared in various countries and in several languages. His most recent novel, *The Assassin's Song* was short-listed for both the Giller Prize and the Governor-General's prize for best novel in Canada.

2002 Communal Riots in Gujarat as the Background

This novel *The Assassin's Song*, primarily set in India is written after the horrific communal riots in 2002 that shook Gujarat, the author's ancestral home state. *The Assassin's Song* is sung by the out of place narrator Karzan – the central character – the next keeper in line to the shrine of Sufi Nur Fazal at Pirbaag in Gujarat. Karzan is but a boy who loves to lead a normal life by playing cricket and reading books.

Vassanji beautifully captures the panoramic country side of Gujarat and the rapidly changing post-independent India through the eyes of the introvert narrator.

Secret visits to a library in the nearby village earn him a scholarship in Harvard University. His landing in Harvard University paves the way for freedom from the iron bonds of his family and from the little shrine. He lets himself move away from the native culture and comes closer to the new culture. He settles in Canada after his marriage, but the urge to visit his roots in Pirbaag haunts him.

Finally, the prodigal returns to the old grounds to witness the shrine in ruins, absolutely destroyed, havocted and a complete catastrophe because of the communal riots.

First Person Narrative Mode

Vassanji employs the mode of First person narration in all his novels and short stories. To mention a few, Kala nee Salim in *The Gunny Sack*, Pius Fernandez, a retired teacher of history in *The Book of Secrets* are the narrators.

In this novel, *The Assassin's Song*, Karzan, the central character and narrator, narrates his tale after the calamity, from the Postmasters' flat, Shimla. This technique enables the author to leisurely flit back and forth in time, memory and space. First person narration facilitates the author to retrieve the past, remembering the past consciously and not nostalgically.

Not Leaving Everything Behind

Histories of individuals, communities and nations fascinate Vassanji. He feels history helps the writer to liberate himself to write about the present and the past helps to create a space. Vassanji believes present can be understood better by unraveling the past. He says, "I am not an immigrant who believes that you leave everything behind" (M.G. Vassanji's interview with Kanaganayagam, chelva. 1991: 23)

In *No New Land* Vassanji honors the past when he airs his voice on Nuruddin. He says, "We are but creatures of our origins, and however stalwartly we march forward, paving new roads, seeking new worlds, the ghosts of our pasts stand not far behind and are not easily shaken off" (Vassanji M, G 2002:9).

***The Assassin's Song* Moves Back and Forth**

The novel *The Assassin's Song* begins in the present, shifts back to the past when Karzan remembers his childhood and adolescence, traces the history of his community and closes in the present with an optimistic note for the future. For Karzan, who is settled in Harvard, the framed portrait of his father in the prayer hall of Premji's house, symbolizes the past. The image of his father seemed to threaten him, though it seemed so false. The past seems to haunt him like a ghost because of his inability to come to terms with the present.

Crisis of Identity

Sheer materialistic pleasures of America and its licentious life makes the Asians change their attitudes. Karzan feels his own tradition as primitive and backward. Though Karzan enjoys the exhilaration of freedom in his new found homeland, he is often terrified and feels lonely. His crisis of identity is aggravated by the letters from his father which instructs him not to forget his self and mission in life, not to succumb to the evil temptations both of spirit and body. His inability to negotiate this chasm between his burning desires to be an "ordinary, secular Indian studying in America" (Vassanji M, G 2007:260) and the responsibilities he has as a successor of the ancient Sufi shrine makes him a drifter in his personal life.

Finally, he writes a letter to his father explaining in detail his decision to live in a place in which he can seek personal fulfillment and where full of other ordinary people like him live. Thus, he resolved the crisis between his self and place by banishing effectively from his homeland and adopting his newfound place as his home.

Through these letters between the father and the son, Vassanji subtly brings out the conflict between the first world and the third world and the impact of the colonial past in the endeavors and notions of postcolonial nations and its nationals.

Sense of Guilt and the Characters of Vassanji

Vassanji's characters always carry a strong sense of guilt. When he talks about the incident of cheating Mukhi, which has an element of guilt in *The Gunny Sack*. the author says,

But perhaps guilt in the book reflects more my sense of guilt – of having left and not having enough courage in me to be in Africa without my people, a feeling of helplessness about not being able to do anything. I think that guilt I carry with me. (M.G. Vassanji's interview with Kanaganayagam, chelva 1991:22).

Reclaiming thePast

Karzan always carries a nagging sense of guilt and exasperation - guilt that he has forfeited his status as the successor of Pirbaag shrine. Freedom from Pirbaag meant more to him than to his mother in her deathbed. He feels homeless when his wife deserts him after his son's death. He decides to comeback to Pirbaag to reclaim his past. The protagonists' decision to return clearly shows his acceptance of the past. For, Vassanji's characters find it hard to get away from the past.

In the Oral Narrative Mode – Some Interesting Strategies

The Assassin's Song evidently employs written as well as oral history. The author blends mythological and traditions of narrative from Islamic and Hindu sources. The technique of using non-English lexical items in the text is a more widely used device for conveying the sense of cultural distinctiveness. It signifies the difference between cultures and stresses the importance of discourse in interpreting cultural concepts Vassanji's strategy here can be described as "overt cushioning" where the explanation for the lexical item is given in the text, "Raja, tumhara ghar kahan hai? Where is your home?" (Vassanji M, G 2007:37).

Another strategy is "covert cushioning" where lexical items can be understood from their contexts within the text. For example, words like 'Bapuji', 'Saheb' that are widely used in the text can be clearly understood. He has also explained certain non-English words in a glossary at the end of the book. He makes use of Indian English dialects or Pidgins through his rustic characters and in his descriptions. When he describes the truck, he says, it was

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“covered all over with pithy sayings –Jai Mata Dil ‘Horn Please’ OK! Oh Evil – eyed one, your face black with shame! My India Great!-and Om signs.” (Vassanji M, G 2007: 35)

Vassanji has judiciously made use of metaphors; the Sufi songs are as precious as pearls, Karzan stands as silent as shadows, etc.

Discourse Communication in the Narrative

Writer’s discourse reveals the communication of the writer’s intentions through his characters and descriptions. The simplest discourse is between two characters. The conversation between son and father which took place after he had seen his mother pouring ghee to the eternal lamp of Nur Fazal, has veiled meanings,

“What is a lie?
Everything.” (Vassanji, M, G 2007:174)

A simple dialogue often carries complicated messages to the reader. The most complex is between the author and the reader.

In both the cases, loaded questions and statements play a dominant role. The successful interpretation of the unsaid determines the author’s viewpoint. When Karsan comes to Pirbaag after the calamity, raises doubts about India’s secularism. He asks, “What is an ordinary, secular Indian, after all? Is such an entity possible? Haven’t recent events in my home state disproved even the ideal of such a notion?” (Vassanji M, G 2007:260) He expects the reader to respond to these ideologically loaded questions.

The description of the violence, which shook Pirbaag, the shrine, “which lies in ruins, the visits of the rats to root the ruins, destruction so absolute, a catastrophe so complete” (Vassanji M, G 2007:26) are characteristic of diasporic writings.

The suggestive and rich resources offered by religious texts have been used to great effect by M. G. Vassanji. The oft repeated statement “Issac did not matter” (Vassanji M, G 2007: 102) from the biblical story strengthens Karsan’s fears that his life too will be sacrificed to Pirbaag. He identifies himself with the son and his father with Abraham the patriarch and stubborn father. Or is it to to another fact that, of the three patriarchs of the Hebrews, it was only Isaac who remained in his own place. Other two moved out, traversed many difficult journeys? So, possibly, Karzan was thinking about himself in contrast to Isaac.

Mothers and Grandmothers

In the Indian and the Afro-American traditions the symbols of mothers, grandmothers are linked with life. M.G.Vassanji is exposed to both Indian and Afro-American traditions. He draws sources from both the traditions.

Karsan's mother is simple and caring, plump and motherly. To him she is very beautiful. She lives in her world of fantasies. Besides her two sons, she loves watching films. For her the illusion of film is everything. Whenever she goes to theater, she wears burqa to conceal her identity. She becomes depressed after he leaves for America. She feels Karsan's father has hounded him and has driven him off. When her son fails her, she becomes sick and hurts herself. She comes out in burqa, showing her face so that she can be recognized, to humiliate his father and finally goes into a state of depression. Here in the novel his mother who was a preserver when he was in Pirbaag becomes a destroyer once he has gone to America.

Karsan's mother turns the veil into a symbol of resistance. It becomes a technique of camouflage; a means of struggle- the veil conceals the conflict. It links her with her illusory world, thus transgressing her familial boundary. When the veil, that once gave her secured boundary, is liberated in the public sphere, it becomes the object of her revolutionary activity. On the other hand in *Amriika* Rumina wears veil / headscarf to show her Islamic identity and follow the injunctions of the Quran for modesty.

Porus Borders and Porus Stories

The traditional technique of building tale and circling back from the present to the past are all features of Indian oral narrative tradition. This technique is ably employed by M. G. Vassanji through his narrator, who recalls his past (dating back to thirteenth century, from the arrival of Sufism, pre-colonial times, partition, Chinese war, Gujarat).

Bhaba in his *Locations of Cultures* recognizes the existence of porous borders between cultures. He feels cultural interaction emerges at the significant boundaries of culture where meanings and values are (mis)read or signs are misappropriated. In this work, also, boundaries are often blurred and the novel is so narrated that one feels he has always been with his father in all his encounters in the west. When he saw his large portrait of his father's in foyer at Worcester, he felt his father was catching up with him.

Even after his marriage he had this feeling, "Or was that my father reaching out yet again; was this Pirbaag's Ancient magic working on me?" (Vassanji M, G 2007: 287)

The Question of Appearance and Reality

This poses the problem of near and the far, as well as the metaphysical questions of appearance and reality. The basic question of dualism versus oneness, or appearance versus reality, is presented through Mr. Padhmanabha's family. Cathy, wife of Mr. Padhmanabha, a devout Christian, has placed so many images of Jesus to compensate for the large statue of Buddha in her house. Their son's name is Gautam-George. Even the protagonist changes his name to Krishna Fazal.

Vassanji's quiet voice has the ability to rise through the ginans or those simple songs, which are steeped in meaning behind meaning, shrouded in thousand veils. . Whenever his father

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narrates to him the history of Pirbaag songs always accompanied it. These songs are very close to his heart. When he is grief stricken, particularly after the sad demise of his son Julien, he takes solace in ginans. He remembers a funeral ginan, “and the flower too withers; O mind, you fool, you deluded butterfly”. (Vassanji M, G 2007: 293). This ginan is a sort of dirge. He is just wondering how his father has taught, him this pessimism, the assertion of grief as a remedy to grief. “The past was told to me always accompanied by song; and now, when his memory falters and the pictures in the mind fade and tear and all seem lost, it is the song that prevails”. (Vassanji M, G 2007:4)

Any Significance for the Blurred Word and Blurred Vision?

This novel clearly defines the idea of Pirbaag, where clearly defined notions of Hindu and Muslim will not work. But Vassanji’s hero treasures a pluralistic view of the world. He is born in a hybrid family where his mother is a Hindu married to a saheb of Pirbaag. His family has neither bowed Kashi nor Kaaba and they are respected for that. The narrator has not given much heed to caste, class, faith and language since his child-hood. Also his prolonged stay in foreign lands where these differences are not a matter of concern underscores his idea of the ‘blurred world’.

M. G. Vassanji, being a migrant himself, is able to portray that all systems of knowledge, not all views of the world, are whole or pure, but incomplete, muddled and hybrid through his protagonist who says, “Our differences are superficial, in fact, nonexistent” (Vassanji M, G 2007: 161)

However, to his brother, who is at home, life is full of divisions and he ultimately becomes a hardcore Muslim and crosses the border to Pakistan.

Destruction of the Innocent

This novel clearly illustrates, when rest of the world requires clean spiritual boundaries, these borderless beliefs, the middle path between the two, the Hindu and the Muslim, the ideal of Pirbaag, directly lead to Pirbaag’s destruction.

However, in a country like India blurred boundaries always work well, because this is heterogeneous society of diverse cultures where people belonging to different faiths will harmonize their beliefs with those religions, if only we are allowed to continue this process.

Caretaker of Pirbaag – Karzan - journeyed back home to carry on his legacy and uphold his father’s belief, “There’s nothing to choose, Karzan, we have been shown our path, in which there is neither Hindu nor Muslim, nor Christian nor Sikh, just the one, Brahman, the absolute, Ishvar, Allah, God.” (Vassanji M, G 2007:310).

Finally, the last lord of the shrine of Pirbaag decided to stop to pick up the pieces of his community and begin anew. For Vassanji believes, “Life seemed to begin and end in community” (Vassanji M. G 1997:16).

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