

Journey of Self Discovery in M.G.Vassanji's The Assassin's Song

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Abstract

This paper attempts to study on journey of self discovery in The Assassin's Song by M.G.Vassanji. It also examines the dilemma of his central character, when roles and responsibilities are imposed he flees denying his heritage. It takes a journey to connect him with his roots and to accept his heritage thereby he discovers his inner self .The paper attempts to unearth protagonist Karsan Dargawalla journey in parallel with the spiritual journey of Sufi saint Mussaffar Shah, who was also called as pirbawa. Thus protagonist journey will be analyzed in depth.

Key words: Migration, Exile, Acceptance of heritage, journey, Self discovery, Escape

Life is generally said to be a journey .Man passes through different stages in this journey .There are several purposes for this journey like journey of escape, journey of search, Journey of self discovery. Vassanji beautifully portrays the journey of Karsan Dargawalla .He comes from a small village Pirbaag in Gujarat. Karsan is caught between the call of the shrine and his desire to be ordinary. The tradition of the shrine calls him to lead life of extraordinary person. He flees to America to escape and to lead a life of Ordinary. But soon when a tragedy strikes in his own life .He is forced to look back on his journey of life.

Karsan's journey begins with his return to hometown and his search of the real identity of thirteenth century mystic, Sufi called Nur Fazal who is otherwise called as Pir Bawa. He also had other names like gardener as he loved gardens and he was also known by a strange name "Kaatil or killer. Intrigued by this name killer Karsan begins to unearth the unknown facts of the holy mystic saint Pir Bawa. The protagonist in the latter part of the novel learns that Nur Fazal journey towards Gujarat was journey of Escape. Nur Fazal was an Assassin. He belonged to controversial Muslim sect of Assassins who rejected the outer form of worship. These Assassins

were even feared by great monarch. They operated from fortress of Western Persia .Karsan says “Nur Fazal was a Muslim mystic who had escaped persecution in a war- torn Near East and was given refuge by the Gujarati King Vishal Dev...”The Sufi’s spiritual journey started with his arrival in Gujarat .At the request of his spiritual master he has taken this journey which has brought him to the kingdom of Vishal Dev. His purpose of this journey was to seek truth of inner existence .He continued his search and was often in meditation with his spiritual guide hoping to attain the truth. Like an ordinary man the Sufi succumbs to the temptation of a seductress soon he loses his contact with his spiritual guide. For eleven months he imposes self exile wanting to reconnect with his spiritual guide. . He wandered in the company of yogis and mendicants to seek truth. Finally outside the great temple of dwarka he hears the voice of his master. Later the Sufi marries princess Rupade and settles in the south of Patan. The king presented the couple a land near the forest which later became their home which was called as Pirbaag, the garden of the pir. Thus Sufi became their guide and guru who showed the people the path of liberation from the bonds of temporal existence. Herby Sufi journey becomes a spiritual journey.

Karsan’s journey on the other hand begins with journey of escape and later becomes journey of self discovery .The prodigal son Karsan Dargawalla after thirty years returns back to the ruined Kingdom of Shrine Of Pirbaag .This Shrine has always managed to survive the ravages of war, has now become victim of Violence in Gujarat. Karsan Dargawalla once abhorred to take up the role of Successor ship of the shrine has now returned to claim his heritage and inheritance. Karsan decides to pick up the ruins of Pirbaag and to tell its story. Karsan’s stay in post masters Flat in Shimla at institute of research is to search on identity of Sufi Mussafar Shah, while searching about the identity of Nur Fazal. Karsan too takes a physical and spiritual journey which makes him to turn back at his own life and to look within. Karsan does not want to be an extra ordinary person . Right from his childhood all he longs is to be an ordinary person and to lead an ordinary life.

His father himself was Saheb- lord and keeper of shrine of Pirbaag. This shrine has been with their ancestors. People from far and wide come to visit the shrine , some to pay their respects to Pirbawa , other for guidance, miracles, .Being the eldest son of the family his family legacy dictates Karsan to inherit the title of his father .

Thus Karsan’s role has been imposed upon him by his father and by the society. The society expects him to take up the role. As a child he was closely observing the activities in the shrine how people looked at his father. He could see his own fathers face beaming; he would lift his right hand for blessing in front of the crowd. But the pryncedom did not appeal him. Karsan’s conflict springs when he sees eyes of people filled with devotion. He begins to wonder whether he was worthy of all. Once he comes across Old Testament and reads the incident of Abraham sacrificing his son Isaac. Isaac was chosen one, Abraham did not even have a choice when god asked him to sacrifice him soon his mind too fills with doubt “Isaac did n’t matter to Abraham. In the same Karsan begins to wonder whether he was a sacrifice. Karsan struggles between his faith and his lust. At the same time several questions enters into his mind. He believes that this

eternal flame was burning due to its mysterious power. The truth about the eternal flame comes to light when he witnesses his mother pouring ghee to the lamp. This shatters his faith and his belief in miracle. Karsan is unwilling to take up the role as heir to Pirbaag he finds the role to be a burdensome in the midst of constant pull of his tradition. Karsan dreams of escaping his ancestral obligation. Karsan express his desire to be ordinary to his mother

“I don’t want to be the sahib; Ma’I said to her softly ‘I just want to be ordinary.’

‘Ordinary? you are not ordinary. You are the successor, the gaadi-varas.How can you refuse?’

As a boy Karsan was passion was playing cricket and break the world batting record for his country. When a former captain R.D.Patel was willing to give him free coaching Karsan rejoiced but on the other hand his father forbid shim saying ‘Think of your position. You are the gaadi-varas’.Thus the conflict between destiny and free will is seen .His mother tells him ‘Sometimes its what’s written for us Karsan,’She whispered.

Both Karsan’s journey and Nur fazal’s journey began with their journey of Escape. The protagonist escapes to America. Karsan wants to liberate himself from role of responsibility of becoming the next successor to the shrine .He always looked at the role as a burden upon him .He wonders “...was this my future? What could I make of this garden of graves? Wasn’t there a way to escape it, find a new destiny?”

Suddenly even escape was possible with the help of George Elias he gets an idea that he can do his higher studies in America. The moment he hears America the words of his teacher echoes in his mind “...You can be anything you want in America...”He applies to the university in America, He goes to America even though his father is displeased with him, and his father gives him a choice. Before his departure his father passes the Bol (a secret mantra) which is usually uttered to next successor of the shrine .Karsan has now found his freedom. He says “Freedom from the iron bonds of history; freedom from the little shrine by the dusty roadside with its rituals and songs, in a little village in which my father was avatar, guru, and god...”The conflict between father and son reaches its height when his father refuses to send him return ticket when he receives a note from his father stating that his mother is gravely sick along with it his father sends ticket .Finally Karsan renounces the status of Gaadi-varas of Pirbaag he severs all his ties with his family. He attempts to lay aside his heritage by leading a life of ordinary man. He takes efforts to forget the identity of gaadi-varas therefore He changes his name to Krishna Fazal. He marries Marge and had a son his Julian. He stops writing to his father to show that he has disowned his responsibilities towards the shrine of Pirbaag. But when a tragedy strikes his life with the death of his son, and departure of his wife .

Karsan’s return to his homeland is a journey of guardian, guardian of his brother, guardian and protector of the shrine of Pirbaag. The moment he steps into his homeland he takes up his responsibilities towards his brother and towards the people of pirbaag While Karsan realizes that for the past thirty years he has abandoned his brother and both of them are complete strangers to one another .Now he decides to rectify that mistake by reaching out to him. After thirty years he meets his brother Mansoor in Ahmedabad near the tea shop .Mansoor gives him ashes of his

father to be buried in Pirbaag. The only question that haunts Karsan is “Am I my brother’s Keeper?” a sermon which he hears in the church near the post master’s flat .Even though he knows that his brother is on the run for a crime. He thinks that as an elder brother it is his duty to become a guardian. Karsan decides to take up journey as a guardian to his brother Mansoor. He says

“This journey is for Ma’s sake, I tell myself, he was her darling, always took priority.

Karsan undertakes a physical journey from Shimla to Delhi to meet his younger brother .His brother has become a rebel and converted himself as Muslim .He has changed his name from Mansoor to Omar. The same brother has become angry, arrogant but more of a stranger. Mansoor is the only link for the protagonist to know what happened to the shrine, about the death of his father, about his mother. He gives refuge to Mansoor in his postmaster flat thereby he takes the risk even when Major Narang along with his men come and search Karsan’s room .Karsan’s meeting with his brother proves a significant one when his brother hands over him his father’s ashes it makes him realize his responsibility that he is to become the guardian of the broken ruins of pirbaag .Karsan had no idea about the broken ruins of Pirbaag but he could see people from various other places trying to restore Pirbaag. Karsan fulfills his responsibility as a son by bury his father’s ashes among On the other hand Karsan tries to recall the Bol:a secret mantra that was passes onto him by his father to him as a successor to the shrine . He resolves to construct a memorial out of the ashes of Pirbaag. Thus Karsan fulfills his father’s predicament when his father tells him “One day pirbaag we will have a museum at pirbaag where all the artifacts and books from our past can be displayed.” This above lines was told to him when Karsan enters his father’s library as a child he notices written records of pirbaag, the songs and stories about them had been copied by hand in order to preserve them from the ravages of time. In the same way Karsan’s father even before his death, before the Gujarat violence he had hidden all these books and few other records under the shrine. Thus Karsan discovers those hidden books and rebuilds the shrine’s library, making the library open to everyone Thus he becomes the caretaker of Pirbaag and fulfills his father’s words “...It will all be yours to look after.”The journey ends with his self discovery by accepting his status of gaadi –varas

Works cited

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