

Vikram Seth's *From Heaven Lake: Travels Through Sinkiang and Tibet*- A People's Travelogue of Cultural Assimilation

Ashima Sona

Former Head, Department of English, Assam Don Bosco University

ABSTRACT

Vikram Seth's *From Heaven Lake: Travels Through Sinkiang and Tibet* is a book that falls in the genre of travel writing. It does not focus on the usual course of monumental history and the architectural details of the places visited. It is in fact an intriguing description of the people of China and Tibet and presented like a Travel Memoir. This paper tries to study the biographical details built upon ordinary interactions with simple humanity that come en route. The richness of the local colours is poured out through various physical, cultural and racial engagements. There is a strange warmth exhibited that brings out the psyche of the people towards a foreigner. It endorses assimilation humanly and culturally. The tone of Romanticism seeps into the descriptions and images about the life and surroundings of the ordinary masses. The theme of Diaspora and Cultural assimilation runs throughout the narrative such that it omits the sense of any cultural displacement and reveals Vikram Seth as a writer with a deep understanding of humanity and culture.

Key words: People, Memoir, Interaction, Cultural assimilation, Diaspora, Romanticism.

INTRODUCTION

Two roads diverged in a wood and I-I took the one less travelled by.

-Robert Frost

Vikram Seth's forte lies in his versatility that ranges from a vast gambit of fictional prose to travel writings. He chose the uncommon road to count more than the places he visited in his travelogue *From Heaven Lake* and become different from his

predecessors who turned out to be the connoisseurs of art and landscapes from their travel adventures.

The book is a travel memoir where Seth chronicles his journey through China to New Delhi via Tibet while studying at university. The winner of the Thomas Cook Travel Book Award in 1983 it documents the travel that takes place in the summer of 1981 when Seth as an exchange student from Stanford, went to study at Nanjing University. It was then he decided to head home in Delhi to spend the summer vacation with his family and feel the homeland. *From Heaven Lake* is the story of Seth's experiences en-route planned quite uncommonly, in a hitch-hiking manner and the trust with the extraordinary people he encounters on the way. The narrative unfolds numerous thinly disguised biographical details with utmost emotion and passion of a romantic onlooker. His travelogue quite unlike the other travel writings is based more on the human interactions and observations of the ordinary beings. The journey traversed across four major Chinese provinces: Xinjiang, also known as Sinkiang, the desert province of Gansu, the plateau of Qinghai, and Tibet is a mirror to the Chinese ethos combined with the writer's feelings drawn from these places.

He was on a three-week tour organised by the Nanjing University for its foreign students, defined by Seth as 'a mixed bunch', which is quite suggestive of the fact that China is a popular choice for students from countries like US, Japan and

India because of its diplomatic and academic relationship on the global front. These students were on leave from their mother universities and during the holidays were permitted to travel in China. Seth explains this aspect further in the Foreword to the 1990 Edition of the book:

“This book is an account of what I saw, thought and felt as I travelled through various parts of the People's Republic of China as a student. It is not intended as a summary of the political or economic situation of that country, although I did occasionally digress into such ruminations in the course of writing the book.” (p 2)

The narrative is bifurcated into descriptions based upon two different journeys undertaken. The first involves covering the desert regions of Turfan, HeavenLake, Mount Bogda and Xian. It was an organised tour meant to show the chosen places to a foreigner. Seth towards the end of it was not content and felt fettered and deprived of the actual glimpse of life and place. He, therefore, at the end of the official tour decided to take up travel by overland via Tibet and Nepal to his hometown Delhi.

The richness of the local colours is poured out through physical, cultural and human tryst. There is an intrepid and adventurous instinct in the author as one finds that the travel route which he took was not a usual one mapped by the tourists in the past.

Seth's journey begins on a hot July day in Turfan, one of the closest cities to China's border with Russia and a major city in Sinkiang. His interest in people is at once aroused at the picturesqueness of the local scene that gives a way into the vivid descriptions of the large variety of Chinese and Tibetan race.

These included Hans, Uighurs, Kazakhs, Muslims, Buddhists, Christians and more. He tries to forge a relationship with the people here and bring out their psyche and their reactions towards a foreigner with subtle eagerness. It gives him

a flight of thought and imagination that puts the narrative under a Romantic prose alive to the picturesque lives of the ordinary masses.

The travel theory suggests that the travel writers construct and interpret reality from their individual angles of vision, and travel writing is an exercise in introducing the 'self' to the 'other', and an attempt to build bridges that link humanity through an understanding of diverse cultures. They create the sense from their experience and perception of the actual reality. This adds the constructivist perspective to travel writings.

Seth builds up the discussion around his travel fantasy laid upon his observations and his perspective. For instance when he describes vividly the towns of Urumchi and Turfan on the northern branch of the ancient silk route where he begins the journey there is reality transfigured into imagination and tale-

“The flies have entered the bus, and their buzzing adds to the overwhelming sense of heat. We drive through the town first: a few two storey buildings of depressing concrete, housing government offices or large shops....(p1)”

He further enumerates the beautiful geographical features of Xinjiang a desert province in China with Turfan the oasis town in it. His observation mark intricacy in the description of “Karez” an underground tunnel used to bring water from the mountains for the purpose of irrigation in the region.

The narrative portrays the spontaneous life of the masses in small towns. Ironically the close interactions reveal Chinese as both convivial and a hospitable race. He says that “for the Chinese people, there is a general sense of friendliness and curiosity towards the individual foreigner.....”(p9). He uses this expression even for the officialdom that restricts the foreigners from interacting with the local population.

Although, he succumbs to the idea of xenophobic tendencies as the foreigners are “closely watched at all times so that it does not see too much, do too much on its own or influence the behaviour of the local inhabitants”(p9), but he seems to relish and recognize their hospitality that mingles naturally into these encumbrances..

Seth throws a keen insight into their racial evolution in his talks about the people of Sinkiang and the complexity of the region. It is now an integral part of China but it once existed as an entirely independent province. A North West part of China with population that constitutes the non-Hans race is unlike the rest of the Chinese who belong to the Hans clan. These people are a mixture of the nomadic communities of Uighurs and Kazakhs, follow the Islamic religion and dress up in colourful attires quite different to Chinese who are fond of grey and blue clothing. The narrative embarks on their features as marked and more like Turkish than Chinese. In his one- to-one interaction with people, Seth discovers the script used in the region is Arabic and not Chinese. They fall under minority community and the narrative presents them in a sympathetic light as neglected and deprived. The region contributes to the socio-racial diversity of China and the divisive elements spread across the geographical boundaries in the vastness of the country.

The memoir points at the change of script by the government in this region from Arabic to Latin to deter any Russian influences on the common masses. The change grossly affected the community and is related in the moving saga of Akbar where the language gaps were created within the family where the grandson and grandfather practised one language and the son another.

The uniqueness of the travelogue lies in the Seth's personal exchanges with the people that enabled the text with such fine quotidian details .On account of these close chats he discusses certain core issues in the light of Cultural Revolution and the

narrative is filled with informal accounts that he has drawn out from a vast cross-section of people during the course of his journey.

Seth brings out the local's psyche and reaction towards a foreigner at close hand.

He recalls from an engagement in a clothing store in Liuyuan that they stare at foreigners in awe; however he discerns certain warmth and compassion that impinges all his interactions.

The narrative has a tone of wontedness and affection and Seth's style of sensory details occur throughout the narrative. The human reality is brought out on the basis of an individual experience with people and society. There is a non-judgmental and non-premeditated understanding of the people that marks the entire narrative.

Ironically he observes that “For Chinese people, there is a general sense of friendliness and curiosity towards the individual foreigner which is remarkable.....”(9). Especially when it appears quite contrary to the usual opinion about them as unfriendly and unpredictable.

In one of the close interactions with a young man in Sinkiang he acknowledges the closing down of the mosques during Cultural Revolution and lends a discussion upon the political scene. The young man thereafter becomes affable and unexpectedly asks him to have dinner at his house. Seth recalls that, later, he even “waits at the bus stop with” him. Seth asks him not to “but he smiles it off-until the bus comes” (32.) exhibiting his cordiality towards him. These recollections delineate the element of nostalgia and assimilative indicators to the memoir through author's warm emotions and respect for the loving and caring people he came across and makes the narrative appear uniquely, a People's travelogue. It strongly endorses a cultural amalgamation on both sides.

The description relates fondly to yet another memorable episode when Seth is made to perform at a cultural event in a

hotel. His song from the popular movie 'Awara' wins him a huge popularity in the Chinese audience and he is able to get endorsements on his passport to visit Lhasa and Tibet and places which are otherwise forbidden to a foreigner. But the officials at the police station greet him with joy and honour on account of his performance.

There is a sense of acculturation built in this episode where Seth recalls that the local musicians as accompaniment began to play the tune from the movie 'Awara' and to his surprise he finds that "they know the tune better than" he did. He finds their obsession for Raj Kapoor and Nargis as unexpectedly amazing when their 'Laj' and 'Lita' turn out to be their 'cultural idols.'

The narrative carves a rather humane and tolerant image of people through their assimilation to a different culture ironically not a dominant one. It ensures both social and psychological well being deviated from cultural hostilities. Such a cultural displacement is positive and rules out a marginalised existence for an outsider.

The memoir recalls through Seth's personal adventure, the existence of corruption in the official and bureaucratic practises. But he managed to escape the official hurdles of red-tapism known as 'guanxi' or 'Lianxi' in the Chinese language on account of his cultural manifestations, his Indian origin and knowledge of Chinese language that fostered a certain liaisoning with the authorities. A sense of mutual cultural assimilation emerges in these experiences where the adoption of characteristics, values and beliefs between the ethnic minority and dominant groups take place. There is acculturation practised in both dominant and minority cultures with the flavouring of Indian Bollywood music in the dominant Chinese populace and the adoption of Chinese language by the minoritised Seth that configures assimilation.

With the formalities complete he takes up his journey home via Tibet and Nepal. He travels by train to Liuyuan and

from there goes to Lhasa via road. The narrative constitutes this part of the journey as full of uncertainties in terms of the route and the mode of conveyance. To go to Lhasa from Liuyuan he takes a lift from a truck driver 'Sui' who agrees to give him a lift.

The account in these moments also reflects upon the high practical sense of Seth who in such an uncertain and cumbersome state is able to befriend a truck driver and capitalise upon the travel opportunities. It was a journey filled with rain, flood and discomfort but Seth tries to make the most in the accompaniment of Sui, his fifteen year old nephew Xiao San and a Tibetan Gyanseng. The narrative once again turns to picaresque in style whereby Seth goes about different places and shares his interesting tryst with people he comes across enroute. It turns out to be a sneak peek into their homes and their lives. He feels-

As I pass through a corridor of sunflowers in the way back to the house, I encounter a dog who tries to lick me and a goat who tries to butt me. At the house, is feeding the insatiable baby. Her six year old niece looks on and laughs (71)

Amidst the journey full of natural discomforts, he was touched by the warmth and vigor of simple humanity reviving the romantic tone of the narrative. The character of Sui somewhat typifies a Chinese temperament. He is an easy, happy-go-lucky man who follows his whims inadvertently and is grossly socially oriented. In fact Seth is irked by his gregarious mannerism as he stops by a lake merely to take fish for his wife. He does try his best to make the panic-stricken Seth feel cheerful and easy. These recollections make appear the narrative's tone social and people oriented than political or historical in content. At Sui's house at Germu, he discovers:

"Xiao Sans father is a thin and gentle man who has a nervous, hospitable manner. In between questions he searches through the toffees in the tin for particularly good ones which he then presses on me. My

teacup is continually replenished and a fresh cigarette proffered before I have finished the last one. (Seth, 83)

The description quite effortlessly projects Chinese though reserved are by and large an affectionate community. The laws of status quotient and class discrimination do not drive their society and so their open warmth seems to bring about the cultural assimilation assuredly even to a foreigner. The narrative exposes the ordinary, mundane details carefully in these nuances and touches upon the psyche of these real characters or people making their existence beyond the geographical and cultural barriers. He was treated like a family at Sui's place and revered wherever he went, offered all sorts of goodies and meals. Sui tries to function as his driver cum guide. Though he is easy going but he also ensures giving a safe ride to him. When they are struck for two days in Dunhuang Sui tries to make a soothing remark to pacify Seth "It's not worth the risk today...we'll definitely try to leave tomorrow."(59) He would give a resplendent view of the small towns, their streets and the bustling life in them and marvellously describe the rustic, picturesque, country life. "The apricots of Dunhuang are marvellous, but just now they are past their prime, while the pears though sweetish, are not quite ripe....."(60).He would wander off in the market and "haggle over grapes and eggplants."(59). The use of

imagery and fine descriptions built the tone of romanticism and Diaspora and cultural assimilation that appears alternatively throughout the narrative. Seth's vision of a humanist and a cosmopolitan writer comes alive when he being a writer of English language chose to write on a non-English and a non-western location like China and Tibet. The travelogue enforces all the interactions based upon kindness and Bonhomie. The sense of cultural displacement is omitted in all these interactions and a theme of assimilative experience is constructed in the narrative. It reveals Seth as a writer with an understanding of human and nature as he feels that it is important "to know other's culture to enrich one's life and also to feel more at home in the world." (139).

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