

BEYOND THE WESTERN GAZE

Vikram Seth's From Heaven Lake: Travels through Sin kiang and Tibet

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Abstract

Vikram Seth's From Heaven Lake: Travels through Sin kiang and Tibet, breaks away from the traditional routes of travel thereby transforming the journey into an unusual and intriguing one. It shows the attitude of the post colonial travel writers who have discarded the traditional routes of travel writing and is interested in recovering suppressed voices and marginal histories. Seth's travelogue brings to us an unexplored world that has always existed but was largely unknown.

Keywords: travel writing, post-colonial, marginal, suppressed, unexplored.

I realize that I / go around the world gathering as much Nostalgia/ as knowledge

-Vikram Seth

(The Solitary Wanderer-the Seth of the Garden)

In literary criticism, post-colonial travel writing has been one of the most prolific and innovative offsprings of the 20th century. The socio-political changes brought about by the new century, has drastically altered the motivation and subject matter of a genre that has traditionally been involved in European expansionism and the construction of Europe's 'other'. Post – colonial Travel writing epitomizes the new developments that have taken place within Travel Writing. No longer an instrument of Imperialism, Post colonial Travel writing aims to correct false colonial (mis) interpretations to criticize colonialist and imperialist ideologies and to disrupt, invert and deconstruct the patterns of European Travel writing.

*Amitav Ghosh in his essay **Stories in Stone** , reveals that the temple at Angkor had remained an important centre of worship and rituals for the Cambodian throughout the medieval period, but*

the celebrated French discovery of the monument in the 19th century pretends, as if ,it never existed prior to the French arrival.

(Nandini Chandra's Vikram Seth's Journey through Mainland China)

This habit of conjuring up stories is a typical colonial habit and Post Colonial Travel Writers seeks to recover such lost stories, marginal histories and suppressed voices .They seek to explore and their journeys are into the mind and psyche of the people.

Vikram Seth's From Heaven Lake however does not specifically fall in the genre of such rescue or recovery missions. *His journal is more akin to the western trope of travel for the sake of travel in the line of Rilke's dictum that, 'a poet must travel in order to write'.*

(Nandini Chandra's Vikram Seth's Journey through Mainland China)

However, considering the fact that Tibet has always been the subject of western gaze considering the scholarly or fantastic western narratives or even via the national geographic, Seth's account cannot remain innocent. What an Indian sees in a heavily Orientalized terrain? Is his gaze different from that of a Western? Does it reinforce the idea of a mystical orient or does it invite us to look into the narrative in a new light?

Vikram Seth was by no means a seasoned or intrepid traveler. The journey to Tibet, he himself mentions is a sort of homecoming by a cheaper and a more interesting route:

"I write a cryptic note, saying that I am going to return by a more interesting route..."

(From Heaven Lake, Travels through Sinkiang and Tibet)

In fact this unusual journey of his is also accompanied by his interest in the minority areas, *"I have always wanted to go, but did not think I'd have the time..."*

(From Heaven Lake, Travels through Sinkiang and Tibet)

Moreover, the tourist buses with their organized tours which leaves no chance for a traveler to explore on his/her own ,seems to inspire an acute perversity in him. He is late and prone to bouts of disobedience. Thus, Seth appears to be lazy, laidback and not very motivated by any overt ethnographic mission. He is so ignorant about the socio cultural ethos of Tibet that this would be more like passing through, than visiting Tibet on his way out; and the glamour of touching and visiting Tibet would compensate his ignorance. In fact, he cheers himself by thinking that it would offer him a fresh perspective.

Reading through his Travelogue we find that, the details Seth furnishes consequently are related to the people he encounters rather than on the legendary and the historical mystique of Tibet customarily dealt with. Seth is drastically different in the compassion and love with which he remembers his friends and the common Chinese men and women. The tableaux vivants or vignettes of the street or marketplace are alive with spontaneous life of a happy go lucky race. But the most remarkable thing is their instinctive kindness and the universal sense of hospitality they display .In fact the very nature of Seth's travels prompts him to interact much closely with the Chinese people, having the twin assets of brown skin and the song of *Awara* to break the ice. In the very first chapter of the book *Turfan*, we find that Akbar the police officer who endorses the travel passes was somewhat apprehensive of Seth's travelling design. But the discussion on the common subject of Indian movies and particularly the song *Awara* indeed helped him to come closer and also in getting his travel pass endorsed soon.

Seth takes us to dinner tables where the educated and the uneducated, workers and professionals sit together. We travel with him to market squares, which take a spontaneous break for song and dance, where the date -sellers son sings with the student from Italy. He takes us to police stations which leaves no stone unturned to recover a common Indian student's stolen luggage. His comment, "*When I think of China, I think first of my friends and only then of Qin hi Huang's tomb...*"(From Heaven Lake: Travels through Sinkiang and Tibet) is more respectful of the friendly spirit he encounters everywhere.

In the Western Travel narrative, we find that places are important for the landmarks they hold. However, it is not surprising to see that the present crop of writers which are located in the metropolitan universities and western cities choose to demarcate themselves from these colonial fixations, by moving away from the picturesque and seek to highlight the people or the temporal above the spatial dynamics of the Western Travel genre. In so far as Vikram Seth is concerned, we find that it is the people who are his real heroes.

The family home is the telos in the Indian cosmopolitan discourse and we find this very much in Seth's travelogue. He is aware that it is the family photograph that he carries inside his passport that gets him the sympathetic ear of officialdom and changes the bureaucratic decision in his favour. Otherwise, it is impossible for an Indian to get a Lhasa permit on his passport.

In the chapter *From Heaven Lake*, he shows us the friendly and congenial atmosphere of his co- passengers on his way to Liuyuan:

“My camera is examined....my watch a present from my father...I am asked whether I have ‘established house’, i.e got married yet and anxiety is expressed when I say that although I am twenty nine, I haven’t. My family photograph is taken out and I am asked to explain my mother’s tikka and my father’s kurta.”

(From Heaven Lake: Travels through Sinkiang and Tibet)

This discussion however concludes with an observation shared between that –

“..the 1962 border conflict between China and India was just an unfortunate incident, the faults of government not people...and a very short period of hostility when looked in the perspective of such a long friendship.”

(From Heaven Lake: Travels through Sinkiang and Tibet)

What idea emerges from the above discussion is that, humanity after all is the same everywhere and any attempt to create difference is not only hazardous but also futile. This brings to our mind Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*; the very title of the novel suggests that all borders and lines are nothing but mere shadows. In fact in the novel, Ghosh by showing the fragility of borders points out that all these are nothing but '*only a mirage , an illusion*'

(Amitav Ghosh: A Critical Study)

Thus, we see that Seth in his narrative is not content to celebrate causes or movements so much as individuals - the warm humanity of common people. He is content to reflect on the foibles and fetishes of everyday wayfarers. His is an attempt to recover the pulse of the common people of China from the veil of Western ideology.

Seth's description shows no traces of condescension in his description of the people and their habits. Rather, it is projected through the well honed art of Geertzian thick description i.e,not merely '*capture primitive facts in faraway places and carry them home like a mask or a carving*', but be able to clarify what is happening in these place '*to reduce the puzzlement*'.

(The Interpretation of Culture)

This can be seen when he gives us the description of the sight of chapping and mincing of the dead body, the feeding of the mixture to the eagles and the battering of the skull. But he makes it clear that, this act is not the result of any barbarism inherent in the Tibetan rituals, but because wood is scarce and the ground hard for much of the year, to allow for burials and cremations. Feeding the corpses to the eagles at least fulfills a basic utilitarian function. Moreover, by showing the inquisitive and callous behavior of the Chinese onlookers, the writer not only distances himself from such an attitude but invests a healthy respect for the spectacle notwithstanding the fact that he feels sick afterwards.

Throughout the novel what is noticeable is the friendship between Seth and Sui, the driver of the Liberation truck which takes Seth to Lhasa. Their first exchange of conversation presents before us the picture of Sui as a practical man who has a straight forward nature.

Throughout the journey Sui follows his own whim and pace, depending on his stock of comic books and the number of stopovers he has to make at the houses of friends and acquaintances enroute to spread goods and gifts. He could suddenly stop in the middle of nowhere. Although Seth bristles against the discipline and punctuality of organized group travels, he also gets irritated with Sui's phlegmatic behavior as he is running short of time as his exit visa expires in a few days time. Yet there is a great deal of camaraderie between them. This is reflected in Seth's concern for Sui's smoker's cough. In spite of the fact that both Seth and Sui have difference in their temperament, they share a special bond. Throughout the journey, Seth came close to Sui and got to know him better. Their accidental last meeting in a Lhasa street is extremely poignant. Besides Sui, there is a host of European student friends; there is Quzha, the unit leader who helps him get a life, Norbu, his Tibetan mate whose cheerful family façade hides the scars of a persecuted political past. By and large, the world Seth travels is a world which is governed by kindness and affection. What however we can conclude that from the vast association of people whom Seth encounters from different walks of life is that, 'Friendship alone can transcend the nationalistic barriers'. Seth's *From Heaven Lake*, forces us to think about the concept of national boundaries and friendships.

Nandini Chandra in her essay, Vikram Seth's Journey through Mainland China, brings forth a wonderful comparison between Seth's account of his journey to China and Paul Theroux's *Down the Yangtze* published in the same year as Seth's book. She notes that pronouncing his verdict on Chinese as racial category, Theroux says:

"The Chinese were unpractical, materialistic, baffled and hungry and these qualities had brought a terrible fatigue to their country".

All this is however observed from his seat in a luxury cruise as it sails down the Yangtze. Seth's reflections are however not prone to such overt judgments and he is not even tempted to categorize the subject populace. His reflections are much more nuanced and unguarded. In Theroux accounts of China, the unthinking slavishly working labour force which

is supposed to stand for the mass of China is contrasted with a group of obscenely rich American tourists who are cruising with him on Yangtze. In the bargain, the Americans are deemed better off in so far as they are seen to be at least thinking individuals notwithstanding the fact that Theroux did not get a chance to speak to this slavish mass. In contrast we see Seth is drastically different in the compassion and the love with which he remembers his friends and the Chinese common men and women. Moreover, extracts from Confucius' Analects, Lao-Tzu and other Chinese poets and painters keep resurfacing in Seth's narrative. This is in deep contrast to the Theroux's description of an unimaginative and materialistic people given to middle class consumerism. This habit of conjuring up things and presenting before us a very different picture is an old habit of the colonizers. Seth in his travelogue prompts the readers to delve deep into the blood and veins of the Chinese people which is a huge storehouse of their history. In the Chapter *From Heaven Lake*, he shows how ignorant he is to the true essence of China, its culture:

"As I listen to the sounds outside, it strikes me although I know a certain amount about the language, literature and history of China; I am appallingly ignorant about the songs, lullabies, the nursery rhymes, the street games of children, the riddles: all the things that are most important to the childhood of Chinese people"

(From Heaven Lake: Travels through Sinkiang and Tibet)

At the end of the novel, we find Seth admiring and appreciating the sight of waterfalls:

"There is an enchantment in flowing water. I sit hypnotized by its beauty; water the most unifying of the elements that this land and sea and air in one living ring. This brings in him a certain curiosity...why do we stare so fixedly at water, the sea, at waterfalls, at streams? It seems perverse when the land is much more colorful, manifold, various. It is simply that water moves while the land is static..."

(From Heaven Lake: Travels through Sinkiang and Tibet)

Through the analogy of the movement of water, Seth emphasizes the true aim of a Travel Writer. Like Basho and Issa, whose observations during the travel sought to bridge the gap

between philosophy and the ephemeral world, Seth follows the touristic urge as well as sallies forth as an independent poet following his own spirit. He questions the longer purpose of the solitary quest, *what is the purpose, I wonder, of all this restlessness?*

(From Heaven Lake: Travels through Sinkiang and Tibet)

In fact the gradualness of his journey prompts him to invest significance even to minute details which appeared so indifferent to him. He mentions in the end that, although, at many points in this journey, impatience has displaced enjoyment. But he marvels at, *'those travelers who out of curiosity or sense of mission wanders through unfamiliar environment for years .It requires an attitude of mind'*.

(From Heaven Lake: Travels through Sinkiang and Tibet)

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