

Travelling across Cultures: A Study of Vikram Seth's Travelogue *From Heaven's Lake*

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Abstract

Vikram Seth's travelogue *From Heaven's Lake*, takes the reader through several cultural paradigms before arriving in China, Tibet, Nepal, and ultimately India. In addition to staying with a segment of the Chinese population, he had the opportunity to see China's natural surroundings, something he would not have encountered at Nanjing University. He discovers that those who reside in China's rural areas have difficult lives. While residing with them, he studied their local customs and attempted to draw parallels between Indian culture and their way of life. For him, seeing the consequences of the Cultural Revolution was an experience in itself. This paper will study Vikram Seth's travelogue and his experiences across different cultures and regions. He has started his journey from Sinkiang and further travels to Delhi via Tibet and Nepal. In his journey, he observes different customs, religions, eating habits, and ways of living. Therefore, this paper tries to study this travelogue as a work representing different cultures and cultural identities.

Keywords: Travelling, Culture, Travelogue, journey

From Heaven Lake: Travels through Sinkiang and Tibet by Vikram Seth is a travelogue that chronicles his first-hand experiences via a road narrative. After Seth visited China in 1983 as an exchange student from Stanford University to Nanjing University for studies, the book was published. He visited the place as a tourist, but his decisions and innate curiosity inspired him to start traveling. Being a global citizen, he has a very wide perspective on the world. His travelogue, which offers an objective, secular, and beautiful description of the scenery in China and Tibet, is a highly-read and respected work of literature. It serves as an interface for spreading ideological and cultural differences and is regarded as a bridge linking China and India, two countries with rich cultural traditions. He embraces both cosmopolitan and colonial ways of thinking in his travel discourse.

Culture is a concept that includes the customs, laws, behaviors, institutions, and norms that characterize human societies as well as the knowledge, beliefs, arts, abilities, and habits of the people who belong to these groups. Cultures are frequently ascribed to, or derived from specific locations. Shared values, ideas, information, abilities, and customs that guide a social group's behavior at a specific moment belong to its culture. It is widely acknowledged that culture is a reflection of how people interact with one another, grow, and respond to environmental changes. Even though Seth has skillfully experimented with every literary genre, his travelogue *From Heaven Lake: Travels through Sinkiang and Tibet*, solidified his reputation as a prolific writer. His trip to China served as the inspiration for the book, and Seth told his readers in the travelogue's introduction:

I am Indian and lived in China as a student at Nanjing University from 1980 to 1982. In the summer of 1981, I returned home to Delhi via Tibet and Nepal...This book is based on the journal I kept and the photographs I took while I was on the road. (Seth *xvii*)

Seth's travelogue is a romantic, lyrical, impressionistic story of the trip he took in 1981 when he had to go back to India for the summer. Seth described him as "a mixed bunch" during his three-week tour, which Nanjing University arranged for its international students. This suggests that China is a popular destination for students from the US, Japan, and India due to its diplomatic and academic ties with these nations. These students were allowed to travel throughout China during their holidays while on leave from their home colleges. 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 traveled 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. (Seth 2)

The nonfiction book *From Heaven's Lake* recounts his personal experiences traveling to the Chinese mainland. There are nineteen chapters in the book. The locations he passed along the way, from Turfan, to Heaven Lake, to Kathmandu and Delhi, are the titles of these chapters. The historical, geographical, and cultural details of the locations he traveled through enhance each chapter. The author graphically illustrates what he witnessed in post-liberation China and describes in detail the philosophy and psychology of the people he encountered along the route. It's been said that learning the language of the destination is a prerequisite for everyone traveling there. Strongly proficient in the Chinese language, Vikram Seth possesses a unique ability to seamlessly integrate into other people's cultures, giving the impression that he is part of them rather than existing on the periphery.

Seth visits China, Nepal, and India—three nations with distinct cultures and religious traditions—as well as the least visited part of Tibet. He encountered numerous people on his travels, each with their own beliefs and issues. His insights are objective and grounded in the

needs and culture of the area. He took the cheapest means of transportation for this trip and joined the local enthusiasm and festivity. He is introduced to his numerous friends and family members by the truck driver Sui, who accompanies him on his arduous journey. They spend evenings and mealtimes together. Sui spends time with his buddies, including Xiao San, Sui's fifteen-year-old nephew, Gyanseng, the Tibetan co-passenger on the truck, and Norbu, the young Tibetan in Lhasa. The novel takes place in a community setting and is filled with loving descriptions of people, food, discussions, and the surrounding environment.

On a hot July day, Seth sets out on his journey to Turfan, an important city in Sinkiang and one of the nearest places to China's border with Russia. The picturesqueness of the surrounding landscape, which gives way to the vivid depictions of the wide range of Chinese and Tibetan races, immediately sparks his interest in people. Hans, Uighurs, Kazakhs, Muslims, Buddhists, Christians, and others were among them. Seth is attentive to details and possesses great sensory flight. Xinjiang is a desert region that is centered on the vast Tarim Basin. Turfan, an oasis town in Xinjiang, relies primarily on underground water resources that have been protected and moved via an antiquated building structure for its crops.

Based on his observations and point of view, Seth develops the conversation around his trip fantasies. For example, he transforms fact into fiction and fable when he details the villages of Urumchi and Turfan on the northern branch of the ancient Silk Route, where he starts the voyage.

“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..”(Seth 1)

He describes the stunning natural features of China's Xinjiang desert area, including the oasis town of Turfan. His remark highlights the intricate details in the account of "Karez," an underground tube that supplies water from the mountains to the area for cultivation. The story describes how people in small towns live their own lives. Strangely, the close encounters show the Chinese to be a vivacious and friendly race. He says that “for the Chinese people, there is a general sense of friendliness and curiosity towards the individual foreigner.....”(Seth 9)He even applies this phrase to the officialdom that prevents outsiders from associating with the community.

Seth provides an insightful examination of the racial evolution of the Sinkiang people and the region's complexity. Though it was formerly a fully autonomous province, it is now a crucial part of China. Unlike the rest of the Chinese who are members of the Hans clan, a portion of North West China is home to a population that is comprised of non-Hans. The story begins with their features, which are distinct and more similar to Turkish than Chinese. Seth learns through his conversations that the region uses Arabic script rather than Chinese. They belong to a minority group, and the story sympathetically portrays them as deprived and

neglected. The area adds to China's socio-racial diversity and the polarizing factors that transcend national borders in the expanse of the nation.

The people in positions of power shape and direct the culture of a society. A group of people is deemed dominant in a culture if they can control social institutions and shape the opinions and behaviors of the larger community. A group of people who control the prevailing ideas, values, and beliefs that form the predominant outlook of a society develop a dominant culture, also known as cultural hegemony. This episode has a strong acculturation theme as Seth remembers how, to his amazement, the local musicians started playing the theme from the movie "Awara" as accompaniment. He discovers that "they know the tune better than" he did. After discovering that their "Laj" and "Lita" are their "cultural idols," he finds their fixation with Raj Kapoor and Nargis to be fascinating. The story, however, does not present a dominant culture but rather one that is more humanitarian and accepting of others as a result of their absorption. It guarantees social and psychological well-being while avoiding cultural conflicts. This kind of cultural dislocation is advantageous since it prevents outsiders from living a marginalized life.

To conclude, due to his love of travel, Vikram Seth was drawn to travel across the provinces of Asian nations, where he engaged with people from all walks of life to discover even the smallest nuances of their cultures. Even though there are numerous issues, he learned how individuals manage to live simply and contentedly without always whining about their circumstances. Seth has traveled through many cultures in an incredible attempt to inform his readers about the experiences he has had with his innate joy, which can only be comprehended by carefully reading the work and drawing connections between it. Travel literature in the modern period is more descriptive of far-flung locations. It is due to the evolution of the social structure, lifestyle, social norms, educational system, globalization, awareness, comprehension, and the desire to not only visit but also inhabit the moon. People are drawn to the world's most developed locations to explore, learn, watch, observe, and feel. Nobody desires to travel to isolated locations such as Tibet, Xian, Gansu, and Uighur. But Seth is so fearless that he travels to these locations with joy and a need for knowledge, illustrating Bacon's adage that travel is part of the experience for the older traveler and part of education for the younger one. Traveling therefore instructs as well as entertains. As a writer who has a great understanding of nature, Seth believes that it's critical "to know other people's cultures to enrich one's life and also to feel more at home in the world." (139).

Works Cited

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