

Cino Diasporic Sensibility in Vikram Seth's Travelogue *From Heaven Lake*

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Abstract

Indian English Literature consists of major travelogues which highlight the adjustment of the writers in the post post-colonial phase, in which they highlight their adjustment in the specific situations and also deals with the freedom from the cultural bondage. In this paper, I have highlighted diasporic sensibility and cultural exploration in Vikram Seth's *From Heaven Lake : Travels through Sinkiang and Tibet*. There is a cultural replication of the nation (India) which is accepted as the world in a familiar concept. However, political barriers create such a great gap between India, China and Nepal that need be explained by Vikram Seth in this travelogue. The approach of the writer is not only to highlight imaginative experiences but also he observes the things as an historian, journalist, biographer, economist and geographer as well. He constructs and interprets realities in his own angles and attempts to build bridges between humanity through an understanding of diverse cultures.

Keywords: cino-diasporic sensibility, multiculturalism, cultural exploration, identity crisis, acculturation

Broadly speaking, we find multiple kinds of literary genres in the 20th century such as fiction, non-fiction, diary, travel writing, autobiography, memoirs and so on. Travel writing has proved as the most popular literary canon because it has questioned the relevance of center and the frequent movement of people from nations to nations and cultures to cultures. Travelling usually means learning familiar surroundings and going places that are, in one way or another, different. Experiencing different, however, may pose a threat to one's identity in that it questions one's concept of self and other. The issue of identity is a crucial one for post-colonial writers and travellers, who (as post-colonials) often lack a stable sense of self due to colonization and displacement. The travel writing constitutes significant role of culture and the writers present their travel experiences imaginatively and construct reality from their own angle. No doubt, it's a kind of subjective writing in which the writer delineates his own culture and finds a platform to experience and explore the other cultures. He also records his own experiences in the context of the cultural dialogue in the 'contact zone'. Travel writing has become central to post-colonial studies. During the globalization of the twenty-first century and accessibility and feasibility of transportation, the threat of journey has become negligible. So, in post post-colonial period, migration has become a common phenomenon for the progress of the people. In the changed scenario, cultural conflict or acculturation is of no use. However, we can find multiculturalism in which all the cultures like different rivers assimilate in the ocean of globalization to adopt and pay regard to the culture of other with the same relevance.

Indian English Literature consists of major travelogues which highlight the adjustment of the writers in the post post-colonial phase, in which they highlight their adjustment in the specific situations and also deals with the freedom from the cultural bondage. They also suffer from cross-cultural tension, nostalgia, search for roots, exilic sensibility, quest for identity and deep attachment to the root nation but such writers develop a sense of broad-mindedness and the quantity of adjustment in any situation which highlight their difference from their predecessors. When looking at travelogues by post- colonial authors one finds that they repeatedly make reference to other literary texts, especially to imperial travellers and their travelogues. For instance, we find diasporic sensibility and cultural exploration in Vikram Seth's *From Heaven Lake : Travels through Sinkiang and Tibet*. There is a cultural replication of the nation (India) which is accepted as the world in a familiar concept. However, political barriers create such a great gap between India, China and Nepal that need be explained by Vikram Seth in this travelogue. The approach of the writer is not only to highlight imaginative experiences but also he observes the things as an historian, journalist, biographer, economist and geographer as well. He constructs and interprets realities in his own angles and attempts to build bridges between humanity through an understanding of diverse cultures. A critic has rightly assessed the work as 'the ceaseless human urge for exploration' that has been the driving force behind all cultural travel throughout the world. Journey is also a metaphor for the human conditions and man's passage through the world.

Vikram Seth's award winning travelogue *From Heaven Lake* is based on a journal maintained by him during the course of a 1981 hitchhiking trip home to India from China via Tibet and Nepal. Seth was a student in China's Nanjing University during the years 1980-82, on an Economics research scholarship supported by the Ford Foundation at Stamford University. In the summer of 1981, Seth and other fellow students had been taken on a sight seeing trip to the Sinkiang province of China in China's north - western desert. A chance singing of the song *Main Awara Hoon* -the theme song from the Indian block buster movie *Awara* in front of Chinese officials won Seth a travel permit for Lhasa by road, which was a rarity since foreigners were generally severely restricted in their movements in China and individual forays into traveling were discouraged. Seth, however ,had ways wanted to visit Tibet, and having got Lhasa stamped on his travel pass by the aforementioned good luck, he found himself hitching a ride in a truck across four Chinese provinces to travel home, against the dictates of both his finances and good sense. This journey was later shaped into the travelogue called *From Heaven Lake*. The writer entitled the travelogue as *From Heaven Lake* which conveys two meanings- political boundaries are man-made which not only tarnishes the beauty of the gift of Nature but also creates barriers among the people of the two nations. The Himalayas cover the range of the three nations referred by the writer such as China, Nepal and India but the three countries have their own political sovereignty and contrast with each other at different levels. Secondly, the poetic interpretation of the title cannot be ignored which indicates the vast range of the Himalayas which no doubt consists of natural beauty and as good as heaven. But the life in such areas is full of difficulties and challenges (*Parvatah doorato ramyah* which means mountaineous life is attractive from afar).

In *From Heaven Lake*, Seth harnesses his remarkable power of observation and blends it with the artistic sensibility to take the reader on an unforgettable journey through the most mysterious and least explored region of Asia. The flavour of the book is enhanced by the spice of a subdued sense of excitement and danger, resulting from hitchhiking through forbidden areas, neatly side-stepping "guiding" (Chinese regulations, to break which is sacrilege in China) and above all by the landscape itself - varied, desolate and bleak, unfriendly, yet breathtaking in its beauty - crossing four Chinese provinces; the north western desert of Xinjiang and Gansu, the basin and plateau of Qinghai and finally, the mountains of Tibet. In the course of his journey, Seth introduces the reader to the various nationalities inside China: Han Chinese who form a majority of the population; Uighurs who are Muslims and ethnically closer to the Turks than to the Hans; and Tibetans who had ancient culture of their own. *From Heaven Lake* is an ideal piece of travel writing delineating the geographical, socio-economic and cultural features of the region in their totality, without being clouded with issues of identity (usually a big issue with post-colonial writers). This latter fact makes the narrative light in tone, in happy contrast with works that tend to grapple with post-colonialism and nausea. The reason for this is that Seth is at home anywhere in the world; the aspect of the world being a global village is more real to him than is the aspect of a post-colonial existence. In the travelogue, Seth does not take pains to set himself apart as a 'traveller' as opposed to being a mere 'tourist'. The distinction is a fine one and most travelogue writers subscribe to it a greater or lesser degree, viewing 'tourism' in an offhandedly derogatory manner. Seth's goal, however, was not to follow in the literary footsteps of travel writers. He only wanted to experience and perceive get the feel of the country, and to see it first hand instead of jetting above it on a homeward bound flight. Writing a book about his travels was never at any point his initial goal. As a result, both his manner and style are refreshing. However from the book, one can discern that it is written in the spirit of a true traveller. A tourist accustomed to Thomas Cook tours would never hitchhike and even if he did he would probably constantly complain about the inconveniences and the hardship of travelling cross-country in an unplanned and spur-of-the-moment manner. Seth on the other hand, finds the beauty despite the hardships, is consistently uncomplaining of what must have been extremely trying circumstances, and even when accosted by strangers and hampered by unforeseen delays, manages to take it all in his stride, intent on his goal to see Lhasa unhindered by closely monitored tourist excursions.

In his travelogue, Vikram Seth highlights the liberal Indian economy and large heartedness of Indians which contrast with the strict and stern economy as well as straightforwardness of China. As a result, Indian economy suffers whereas Chinese economy is progressive and developed. Since, Vikram Seth went to Nanjing University for his research work in Economics, he aims at highlighting the first determination and strong administration of China in the interest of the nation. Although, Vikram Seth is fond of Hinglish, Ugrlish, Tanglish in some of his works and a great innovative writer e.g. *The Golden Gate* is a novel written in sonnet stanza form. In this travelogue, Vikram Seth highlights Chinese economy as a role model for any of the developed countries. Seth deals with his strong endeavours to come back to his root nation via Tibet and Nepal which consists of many troubles and travails which the writer experienced during the adventurous journey. The book also consists of certain extracts of poems in order to highlight his poetic bent of mind. He also included photographs as well as maps which the writer gathered during his journey. In this travelogue, instead of merely discussing the places to stay or sights to

see, Seth demonstrates the value of cultural adaptability and sensitivity as he describes the land, the people he met, and the fragility of Tibet's cultural heritage in the wake of China's cultural Revolution. In this travelogue, he has published an account of his unorthodox travels in China using unconventional modes of travel. The book offers an intriguing exploration of places and people in China and Tibet. In his brief introduction to the first edition of the book, Seth tells us that the journey was undertaken when he lived in China as a student at Nanjing University from 1980 to 1982. In the summer of 1981, he retrieved home to Delhi via Tibet and Nepal. The land route, which he followed on his hitchhiking journey in trucks, originated in the oases of north west China and went on to the Himalayas crossing four Chinese provinces : Xinjiang (Sinkiang) and Gansu in the northwestern desert, the basin and plateau of Qinghai, and finally Tibet. It is a leisurely account of Seth's travels and has some truly poetic description of the natural landscapes of China and warm evocations of ordinary Chinese men and women with whom he struck up friendship.

From Heaven Lake deals with cultural revolution prevailing in China which on the one hand determines Buddhism as a religion and on the other hand, innumerable innocent students were killed in an atrocity imposed by the Government of China which indicate the double ideology of the nation. It is an outstanding travelogue which consists of poetic extracts, maps, photographs, geographical surveys, historical facts, political scenario and religious conflict in order to authenticate his basic thoughts, principles, experiences and observations. He is such a voracious reader who did Diploma course in the Chinese language before going to China in connection with his research work in Nanjing University, China. In one section, the poet highlights seven landscapes of his Sino-Tibetan and trans-Himalayan experiences. Vikram Seth highlights Indo-Chinese relationships in most of his works. He is of the opinion that human relationship is more valuable than political barriers. Seth does offer possibilities of understanding a different socio-cultural environment and makes a conscious attempt to bridge the gap between the self and the other. There is a great deal of sensitivity and respect in Seth's description of the funeral ceremony near the Sera monastery where he witnesses human corpses being cut up, minced and fed to 'disciplined eagles'. While this is a rite that is increasingly being replaced by cremation, Seth sees it in the context of religious rituals towards the dead.

Christians and Muslims bury their dead, in effect feeding them to the worms. The Parsis feed their dead to the vultures in their Towers of Silence, but they leave the bodies whole. Here in Tibet, where wood is scarce and the ground hard for much of the year, the body is chopped up, mixed with meal and fed to the eagles. (Seth 150)

From Heaven Lake highlights the most prolific and innovative situations of the 21st century life and literature in which travelling is not a threat but a source of pleasure, privilege and proud. Sino- diasporic sensibility has been highlighted in this travelogue. The title *From Heaven Lake* denotes an historical place near Indo-China border, that is, Mansarovar Lake which is located in the vast range of the Himalayas. The writer wishes to say that Himalayas and Mansarovar are the products of nature which can never be ignored. However, both the countries quarrel with each other on account of political intentions. The love of the one is the hatred of the other. Not only this, political leaders have their own interests which enhances the hatred with the other.

The travelogue includes the autobiographical elements of Vikram Seth from his familial background of his childhood experiences spent in Patna and the discourses of economics, art and philosophy. The protagonist of the work is an economist and a cultural theorist. The writer focusses attention upon the democratic rights of freedom of expression and action which is lagging behind in China. India consists of a cultural baggage in which we find diversity of culture, language, food habits, clothings, but there is a sense of mother hood towards the nation and democratic freedom which bind each other. On the other hand, China enjoys the lion's share of economic growth and development in the world market on account of strict and stern rules and regulations imposed upon the common people. In this way, Vikram Seth on the one hand favours Indian democratic mode of life; on the other hand, appreciates the radical growth and development of China.

There is an acclimatization of intertextuality, transnationalism, multiculturalism, post post-colonialism and psycho-analysis in this travelogue. Now, the tension and turmoil which the travellers used to face during the colonial period can never be perceived by travellers of the age. Most of the times, they travel for the sake of pleasure or for better prospect. So, they can easily adjust in the adopted countries. As far as Vikram Seth is concerned, he is the representative of multiculturalism and post post-coloniality. His *From Heaven Lake* is a travelogue dealing with the milieu of China which is supposed to be a Buddhist country of non-violence but at practical level, the nation is dominated by atrocities, ruthlessness and reservation of the politicians for proper growth and development of the nations at every level.

To conclude, Vikram Seth carries the baggage of the nation and culture of his root nation, that is, India and gets success in his trip on account of the cultural baggage of the root nation. Secondly, Vikram Seth does not encounter any conflict and tension in this travelogue because of his liberal approach in his life. He accomodates and adjusts in all situations because in the 21st century, it is the dire need of time and space to adjust in any situations. Vikram Seth is an individual but the representative of a successful man who can easily acclimatize in any situation irrespective of caste, creed and culture.

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