

Contours of Cultures: Vikram Seth's Vision in *From Heaven Lake*

Dr. Ramasubbiah

Assistant Professor of English

Mannar Thirumalai Nayakkar College

Madurai

mannarsubbu@gmail.com

A detailed study of the historical genealogy of today's travel writing takes one straight into the combined histories of literature on the one hand and society on the other. Importantly, many travellers wontedly follow the path of travellers from previous times, so there is a strong sense of this kind of writing presenting itself as part of continuity. The current fascination with the Oriental regions, a fascination that has come to the fore in the past decade, provides one example of how travel writers are also intrinsically writing about somewhere else. It is possible to learn how cultures construct their image of other cultures, how the image changes or remains constant through time.

Travel writing is more than a geographical account, local colour, spirit of place, or depiction of manners and morals, and is actually a form of a memoir or an autobiography. The radically new thing is the perception that travel books map out the territories of the mind, define contours of nations and communities, and determine forms of cultural and political representations. They mediate across disciplinary boundaries and knowledge systems. So when Travel writing is properly handled, it illuminates the understanding of society and culture.

From Heaven Lake was Vikram Seth's first commercial success and the book which gave him confidence as a writer. When the book was first published in England it won the Thomas Cook Travel Book Award for 1983. Seth insisted to Eleanor Wachtel in an interview by adopting a calm composure that he did not keep journals of his trip and "just a notebook, and odd scraps of paper." (89)

Many revealing examples of Seth's character are found in the early pages of *From Heaven Lake*. According to Dr.Tanushree Nayak, "Whatever Vikram Seth may lack in years or experience, however, he makes up for, in *From Heaven Lake*, with his fresh, literary reportage on the people and day-to-day life of contemporary China" (49). When the travelogue starts Seth is already travelling, in the midst of a three week tour that has been organised for the foreign students at Nanjing University, China. The travel group are in Turfan, an oasis town in the northwest desert province of Xinjiang (Sinkiang). When the bus stops at some ruins, Seth walks away by himself, and he is the last to get on the bus, which, as the guide complains at his watch

and sucking in his breath, is usually the case. Seth does not find the restrictions put in place by organized group travel appealing to him and in fact it is exasperating to him as he prefers to be alone to follow his own inclinations to explore. He says “I do not think that I will be able to tolerate the limitations of group travel much longer” (FHL 6). Later, on his own on a train headed back towards the northwest, he enjoys the freedom of a solitary traveller: “It is pleasant to be travelling by myself”. (FHL 35)

Regarding Seth’s company during the tour only a few of them are mentioned – Claire, with whom he has a later farewell dinner in Nanjing, and John,, who proposed the idea to go to Heaven Lake and later in a Lhasa guest house he briefly meets four other travelling foreign students, but for the most part he is alone, a solitary traveller who encounters various individuals of different cultures. These encounters are central to Seth’s Oriental visions and he rightfully dedicates *From Heaven Lake* to the people he met along the way.

The journey begins from Turfan a very enervating hot city in July. Seth is pretty impressed by the *karez*, the Chinese word meaning the irrigation tunnels. These tunnels bring water to Turfan from the far-off mountains, and when the guide, Abdurrahman, points out an entrance where the farmers can enter to make necessary repairs Seth is very interested, “The water is too tempting. “I think I’ll be an honorary commune member,” I murmur, as I take off my shoes, slip of my shirt and drop my legs over the edge of the well. “See you at the mouth of the karez.” (FHL 7)

Even though the guide warns him against it Seth takes the plunge. The darkness and the slippery walls make it very difficult for him to get back out. This is escalated by a small swarm of wasps whose nests he disturbed at the mouth of the Karez. D.Maya observes, “The poet’s spirit as he languishes in the luxury of nature’s plenty is one with that of Confucius, the sensitive sage who approves of the disciple whose only desire in life is to bathe in the river Yi in Spring and to enjoy the breeze and go home singing poetry”. (55)

This incident shows Seth’s insatiable thirst for discovery and different cultural experiences. When on an earlier guided visit to the Mogao grottoes at Dunhuang ,Seth reminisces, “When I was there last month, I finally gave up listening to the guide and wandered around the orchards. Standing on a friend’s shoulders I later managed to climb into a walled-up cave which the guide had ignored. It contained Tantric murals of a powerful and somewhat gymnastic sexuality”. (FHM 47)

The movement of foreigners was strictly controlled in China at that time, with travel passes approved by the police required for every place. As Seth remarks of the perplexing status of a foreigner in China at that time: “....it must be 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,” and that is because “officialdom is disturbed by too much contact between Chinese and non-Chinese.” (FHL 9) Nevertheless, Seth gains rare permission to travel to Tibet. At the guest house where they are staying, when some local musicians perform the students make their contribution to sing. Seth sings “the theme song from *Awara* (The Wanderer), a sentimental Indian movie from the 1950s that is astonishingly popular in China.” Seth is astonished and pleasantly shocked to hear the song hummed on the streets of Nanjing and he is automatically transported back to both India and childhood. He also finds the musicians more familiar with the tunes than him.

The next day Seth goes to get his travel pass stamped for Lhasa and is taken to the General Police Station, where a young police officer named Akbar is the only one who can stamp his travel pass. Akbar arrives in a short while with a friend and it turns out that he must telephone Urumqi for permission to stamp the travel pass. When he goes to do that Seth engages in conversation with his friend who was in the crowd when he sang the song from *Awara*. They are joined in a short while by Akbar who says the line to Urumqi is down and they start discussing Indian movies and *Awara*. The three of them “talk in eccentric and exhilarating circles for another twenty minutes” (FHL 14) Akbar ultimately cannot get through a call to Urumqi and since Seth is leaving tomorrow and feels disappointed, beyond expectation, Akbar responds, “Oh, well. Then I will endorse your pass now” (FHL 14). From this incident it is obvious that the friendly atmosphere created by the lively conversations about Indian movies and *Awara* had broken the cultural barriers and got Seth his required exit pass. Tanushree Nayak says, “As an Asian travelling through Asia, Seth is accepted by the people from every strata of Chinese society in a way that few *waibin* (foreign guests) from Western countries could be.” (53)

Seth also has some unexpected encounters with the Oriental culture. For example, his ability to write “Hindustan” on his palm in Urdu causes a dramatic change in the annoyed demeanor of the old Uighur owner of a cap shop. The Uighurs as Seth observes are Muslim in culture and religion. Their script is Arabic and they are racially more akin to the Turks than to the Chinese. The old Uighur readjusts his spectacles, catches hold of his wrist tightly and peers at the writing. His face lights up on seeing it as Urdu and Uighur share the same Arabic script. Seth had gone to buy a blue cloth cap to protect his head in Tibet. The old man lowers the price of the cap by one yuan immediately on seeing the Urdu script but Seth refuses to accept it. Suddenly the man

grabs the cap from Seth's head and to Seth's horror begins to rip it apart. Many young boys also gathered there. Finally Hussain, a twelve year old boy who has learned Chinese in school translates the old man's shouts: "My father says he will make the stitching firmer for you because you will be travelling a long way." (28) When the old man returns the cap to Seth, the two no longer need a translator as the language barrier that has been overcome by the thoughtfulness of the gesture. What might have been an embarrassing and awkward cross-cultural encounter ends with Seth taking his leave in the fittest way possible: "As I nudge past the fifteen spectators at the door, I turn to say 'Salaam Aleichem', knowing that he will understand this." (28)

Similarly, when Seth visits the Grand Mosque in Xian, it is his respectful attitude to other cultures that attracts the notice of a young man. Even when the service is over Seth does not enter the main hall, as from the entrance he notices a few worshippers inside, and this leads a young man to approach him: "I've been watching you for a while... You have a very respectful attitude" (30) Thus due to his respect for other oriental cultures, Seth gains the approval of this young man, who in turn provides Seth with one of his first insights into the human cost of the Cultural Revolution which shook China sometime back. Though appearing uncomfortable at the admission, the young man acknowledges that the mosque was closed down, there was some destruction by the Red Guards, and services were forbidden during the Cultural Revolution. Mass services were held secretly in private homes, but the young man sadly admits, "The whole flavour of our life changed during those years" (31).

On another occasion, it is a family photograph that produces a similar magical result. Having arrived at Germu, Seth is taken for questioning by a stern police officer. This is because Seth should have reported immediately upon arrival which he did not. The questioning is quite severe and starting to probe Seth's plans for travel beyond Lhasa, until a dramatic change occurs when Seth is asked for his passport:

I hand it over. As I do, a colour photograph of the family – Papa, Mama, Aradhana, myself – drops out of it onto the table. The officer looks at it - ... and, for the first time smiles.

"Your family?"

"Yes".

His whole attitude changes. (79)

In fact, the whole atmosphere changes, with the now friendly officer asking Seth about his family and studies, telling him that he can go, that the registration forms will be sent to him in the

morning and wishing him well. This time it is not Seth's singing, fluency, or manners that have won him favour, but the simple fact that he is part of a family, and thus recognizable as a fellow human, not just a creature subject to regulations.

Seth is a traveler who conducts himself without any blatant partisanship or bias to any person or any country. So it is imperative to know about the nature of the narrator in order to ascertain what he is showing about the world. That's why it is to a reader's advantage that Seth brings his poet's perspective to the task, a perspective that enables him to see accurately and perceptively, noting revelatory details that others might overlook and ignore.

Even though Seth has a slight build, small and dark-haired, wears Chinese clothes for the most part and speaks Chinese he is keenly aware of his status as an outsider and sensitive to being an object of curiosity: "one is often conscious of a minute examination of one's dress and behaviour upon first acquaintance; the impression is that one is considered not merely foreign, but in some sense weird" (FHL 9). Ironically, Seth occasionally has problems because he is taken for Chinese, as happens when he meets Claire for dinner at a hotel in his last night in Nanjing. He is wearing Chinese clothes, his hair has been cut, and he has new Chinese spectacles, so the guard challenges him: "Stop, comrade Didn't you hear me? What unit are you from? You can't go in there" (FHL 34). It is only as Claire walks up that the guard realizes his mistake, though Seth is privately pleased that he for once does not stand out as a foreigner: "The guard looks abashed, but I am pleased that with my loss of hair and gain of spectacles I do not now appear too emphatically un-Chinese." (FHL34)

Seth is never snobbish or disdainful towards others, even when he suspects he might be the victim of a joke. At Heaven Lake, when he had the urge to go for a swim, he unties his shoelaces and asks if the lake is good for swimming. Mr. Cao, the manager of the mess-hall, and the cook begin an elaborate cautionary exchange about "the Beijing athlete" who disappeared one day on his regular swim across the lake and back. Seth cannot be sure that they are fooling him or not but nevertheless he takes a short swim close to the shore and manages his defeat gracefully.

The narrator's visions can be restricted or influenced by physical and emotional conditions. This is seen throughout the travelogue. The debilitating heat of the desert is an early constraint, the plunge into the unguided blackness of the Karez momentarily eclipses all vision, the Dunhuang caves are locked up, the shops and dwellings around the Jorkhang temple at Tibet are deep narrow cells whose interiors can only be dimly glimpsed and there are also regulations regarding foreigners entering the temple. At one time in Liuyuan, when Seth is alone, depressed, unable to sleep, he writes that "All signs and certainties/Are lost to vision now" (FHL 47). The

linkage between Seth's physical and emotional states can be best viewed when the same Tibetan landscape appears quite differently to him at different times. This is when once driving into the setting sun in Tibet; a painful altitude headache produces a horrific effect: "The atrocious glare merges with my atrocious headache to give this beautiful landscape the quality of a scene in a nightmare" (FHL 97).

But the next day, despite the woeful effects of having spent two cold, cramped nights in a truck, Seth rejoices in the scenery: "But there is an exhilaration to being in Tibet, especially in this lush and beautiful area that we are driving through, that predominates over all thought of discomfort" (FHL 101). Similarly, Seth's visions of the Potala palace in Lhasa, Tibet differ in its first and final views. Seth says that the first visions of the Potala palace from the distance emphasize its grandeur, beauty and loveliness, but when he visits the Potala, feeling dizzy and his senses exhausted, Seth finds the experience so overwhelming that he has to sit down outside before retreating to the sanctuary of his room for the rest of the day.

Language can often prove to be a barrier to understanding when cross-cultural encounters take place. Seth is enviably well versed in Chinese that gave him access to so much on his trip, but when he cannot understand the advice of an amused Tibetan yak herd, Seth laments a lost dimension of experience:

If only I knew some Tibetan how much more interesting this trip would be. As it is, I can only understand Tibet through the filter of those Tibetans who speak Chinese, almost all of whom are under forty. How their elders view the rapid and irreversible changes that have occurred since 1959 is something I have no way of comprehending. (FHL 102)

In the initial stages, Seth's academic background influenced his view of China. After all, he was at Nanjing University to do economic and demographic research on some Chinese villages for his Ph.D. in Economics at Stanford. But after benefiting from experience, he altered his perspective and it made him correct his once flawed vision of China: "When I first went to China I was far more blindly enthusiastic about its achievements than I am now, I now see that China's achievements are solid but have serious drawbacks..." (FHL 106). Seth has also learned that statistics do not necessarily give one a clear picture. With his multicultural background, language ability, receptive open-mindedness, critical self-awareness, and poetic sensitivity, Seth makes an ideal travel writer. Not only does he provide an insightful overview of the trip that he is narrating, but late in the book, among mountains and waterfalls, Seth's perceptions expand to the sublime level of visionary insight when he experiences a series of illuminating discoveries.

When Seth and his Nanjing group are taken to see some vast ruins very early on, Seth quickly leaves the guide and group: “I walk away by myself, and climb a flight of collapsing steps to the top of a high wall. From here I watch a donkey-cart with a load of grass- green! green! – trundle through the baked ruins to a market in the small settlement beyond.” (FHL 3)

The reward for Seth’s effort may not seem a monumental achievement, but Seth has gained a rejuvenating sight that is his alone, and this pattern is seen throughout *From Heaven Lake*. In another incident after dinner at a commune in Dunhuang, Seth goes for a walk. He comes to a field of corn surrounded by a deep grown hedge of marijuana plants and sees a mud building that looks like a Buddhist temple. He sees that it is in ruins and goats graze amongst the rubble. Someone had written a poem in Chinese in white chalk on these blackened walls:

This day Zhi Xiong came to the old temple.

He came from far away with no other intention

Than to see the ancient temple,

And he saw it and wept.

I stand in that lonely place for a while, and feel like weeping myself. (FHL 61)

An old man Seth asks tells him that the temple was pulled down and burnt in the Cultural Revolution, and the monks beaten to death and driven away. Since then nobody had dared to build the temple again. Seth is drawn to China, and especially Tibet, more by a longing to know the roots of his cultural and literary heritage than by mere wanderlust. He does not make his journey to see strange and distant lands, but to absorb their ancient traditions and modern values in their cultures and to be near their mystic powers. Thus Seth by his visionary exploratory instincts has gained another painful insight into the lingering effects of the Cultural Revolution.

Works Cited

- Seth, Vickram. *From Heaven Lakh. Travels through Sinkiang and Tibet*. 1983. New York: Vintage, 1987. Print.
- Mirsky, Jonathan. *New Statesman* 7 Oct.1983: 25.
- Otness, Harold M. *Library Journal* 1 May1984: 899.
- Robinson, Andrew. *British Book News* Nov. 1983: 713-14.