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### Vikram Seth: A Literary Descendant of Ibn Battuta, Faxian and Xuanzang

#### ABSTRACT

Published in 1983, *From Heaven Lake*, is one of the most important travelogues written following the footsteps of Ibn Battuta, Faxian and Xuanzang. The travelogue is based on Seth's journey from China to Tibet, Nepal and then his home country India. It deals with the people he met and describes the places he visited during his journey. Further the nature, tradition, Culture, Religion of Chinese people is observed by Vikram Seth in great deal. Vikram Seth established himself among the great travel writers by writing the travelogue *From Heaven Lake*. It is to be pointed out that most of the travellers came to India to study in Takshashila or Nalanda Vishwavidyalaya which was the centre of study in ancient times and wrote their travelogues and gave the details while Vikram Seth wrote it 1980s after his trekking and hitch hiking journey to India from China through Tibet and Nepal after he had spent two years at Nanjing University.

**Key words:** travelogue, culture, race, conflict

The travelogue is a literary form that is both Eastern and Western. Most of the earliest travelogues were written by pilgrims and historians, some accompanying the invading and conquering forces. The most famous travellers in ancient time were Marco Polo, Ibn Battuta, Faxian (Fa-Hien), Herodotus, Vasco da Gama, Amerigo Vespucci, and Xuanzang.

Marco Polo, a famous traveller, was a Venetian merchant who is believed to have journeyed to China during the Mongol Empire. He first travelled with his father and uncle when he was 17-year-old and it was the first time that he met his father because his father was a merchant and just returned to his country. He travelled not only through water, but over

the land too which later came to be known as Silk Road. His journey lasted for 24 years, and when he returned his country was at war. He was arrested and imprisoned and it was where he narrated his travel narrative to Rustichello da Pisa, a fellow traveller. Later, it was published as *The Travels of Marco Polo*.

Born in 1304 in a Muslim family, Ibn Battuta, a famous traveller and resident of Tanginer, Morocco, started his journey when he was only 20-year-old to the Eastern Hemisphere and wrote a significantly long account of what he had seen and where he had been. In his work, Ibn Battuta gives a detailed account of the people, places, politics and lifestyle in most of the lands he had been in Africa and Eurasia.

Perhaps the first and the oldest Chinese traveller who was also monk and trekked India was Faxian also known as Fa-Hien. He was born in 337 A.D. in Wuyang, Shaanxi province and was named Gong. At the age of three he was inducted into the Buddhist faith and renamed as Faxian which means “manifestation of the law”. He trekked across Taklaman desert and visited the major Buddhist sites in India. He travelled to Shri Lanka too. In Loulan he found that people dressed like Chinese but practised the Indian Custom and clergy, as he saw, read Indian book and practiced Indian Language.

Another famous traveller as well as Buddhist monk was Xuanzang, who visited India in 627 A.D. and gave description of Indian Culture, translated the Buddhist religious script into Chinese. He also said that the correct pronunciation of Indian was Yindu which is still in use in China.

In English literature, especially in the novel, we see a great impact of travelogue form. The Eighteenth Century witnessed the rise of long prose narrative and novels. Texts like *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) and *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) used a type of travelogue form and are not travelogue proper because they are largely imaginary. Swift used the sea voyage and the discovery and exploration of an imaginary land as a metaphor with which he attacked and satirised contemporary British society. *Robinson Crusoe* is also an imaginary travel narrative that stress the values of Industry and labour, besides being a Postcolonial text. These novels have some characteristics that are the integral part of a travelogue like it is written in the first-person narrative and has no plot but the story advances in very loosely connected adventures. The novels, *Lozarillo de Tornes* (1554), *Don Quixote* (1615), *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884), *Tom Jones* (1749), *Moll Flanders* (1722), *Joseph Andrews* (1742), *The*

*Adventures of Roderick Random* (1748) and *Unfortunate Traveller* (1594) are most famous imaginary travel narrative and that can also be said as imaginary travelogue.

Vikram Seth who was born in 1952 in Calcutta (now Kolkata) is a well-known travel writer, poet and novelist and is best known for his three works: *From Heaven Lake*, a travelogue written after his journey which he made by hitch hiking from China to India through Nepal, *The Golden Gate*, a verse novel which was published in 1986, and *The Suitable Boy* published in 1993. Vikram Seth studied at Nanjing University during 1980s and took the risky journey instead of direct and comfortable flight to India and written and expressed his experience during the journey. He was awarded the Thomas Cook Prize, a prestigious travel-writing award for his travelogue *From Heaven Lake*.

Written in the form of travelogue, almost 25 years ago, when both India and China were not much developed, *From Heaven Lake* published in 1983 by Vikram Seth, describes the places and people he met during his hitch hiking journey first with foreign students of Nanjing University—he was student in this University in 1980s—to the places of Turfan, Heaven Lake, and Xian, arranged by the Chinese authorities and later from China to Tibet, Nepal and to his home country India. This is based on the journal he kept and the photographs that he took on the journey as he himself says in the introduction of the book:

The land route—for this was a hitch hiking journey—from the oases of northwest China to the Himalayas crosses four Chinese provinces: Xinjiang (Sinkiang) and Gansu in the northwestern desert; then the basin and plateau of Qinghai; and finally Tibet. This book is based on the journal I kept and the photographs I took while I was on the road. (xvii)

While at Heaven Lake, he, much inspired by the natural scenario of the lake, gives the travelogues a title on its name *From Heaven Lake*. On the way while hitch hiking, he met people of various caste, belief, religion, culture and tradition—Hans, Uighars, Buddhists, Confucians, Kazakhs, and Muslims. While travelling in a truck with the truck driver Sui and his 15-year-old niece Xiao San, he became friend with him and met his family and friend, knew their culture and social conditions. Describing the Chinese people, he met at various places, he said: “With no thoughts other than kindness, people have helped me along in this journey. And this experience is merely a communication of what I have felt through my travels in China: a remarkable warmth to the outsider....” But for the Chinese officials he is sarcastic:

Officials treat the foreigners as one would a valuable panda given to fits of mischief. On no account must any harm come to the animal. On the other hand, it must be closely watched at all times so that it does not see too much on its own, or influence the behaviour of the local inhabitants. (p.11)

Seth, while singing a song from Indian movie *Awara*, Raj Kapoor starrer, gets the chance to know the Chinese people who are fond of Indian cinema. This proves beneficial for him to get permission to visit Tibet which they call as “autonomous region” and is forbidden for foreigners and have to take especial permission for visit. India and China have often been opposed politically. Very often these two Asian giants have clashed both militarily and in world forums. Even today, Pre, and Post Doklam stand-off, India and China seem to be on the brink of war. However, as Seth’s experiences shows culturally and emotionally many Chinese identify with Indians. The prime example of this in *Heaven Lake* is Raj Kapoor and *Awara*. *Awara* is an Indian movie which was most famous in China at that time.

Politically, culturally and ideologically people have different ideas but at a certain level they have the instinct which are same and humane. In this regard, we can say that the case of Vikram Seth is same. He is loved and helped by the Chinese people and in response Seth too praises them. His man to man contact is so good that no one can say that there is any kind of rift between the relationship of these two countries.

Most of the earlier travelogues were written by those who came involuntarily and/or for religious purpose. They came India when there were no means of good transportation like present day and they came with some concrete purpose as already has been mentioned above. Like, Marco Polo was a trader and journeyed to China during the Empires of Mongol, Vasco da Gama was also sent, with the purpose, in the search of new land to trade with. Chinese people came to India either for religious purpose or to get education in Takshashila Visvavidyalaya or Nalanda Vishvavidyalaya, at a time when there was no vehicle to ferry them and they had to trek. *From Heaven Lake* is one of the travelogues written following the footsteps of Faxian and Xuanzang, but in reverse form. Vikram Seth unlike others was a student in Nanjing University and took the most unsafe and less-travelled routes during his hitch hiking journey at a time when the political situation of China and Tibet was unstable, risking his life, career, and future at the same at once when there were more suitable forms of transportation but establishing himself in the category of Ibn Battuta, Faxian and Xuanzang by observing Chinese culture, custom, costume, their people, their oppression,

suppression, and the administration and all these detailing into the *From Heaven Lake*. To conclude it can be said that, While, *From Heaven Lake* is written when Vikram Seth is getting education at Nanjing University and instead taking a direct flight to India, he voluntarily journeyed through hitch hiking. While reading *From Heaven Lake* and seeing Seth crossing through the mountainous region of Tibet, one remembers the journey taken by Ibn Battuta, Faxian and Xuanzang.

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