

## Art and Narrative in *From Heaven Lake*

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### Abstract

Vikram Seth in his travel book ‘From Heaven Lake’ adopted photographic technique to portray the inner and external realities of China and Tibetan culture. His photographic technique is vivid and lucid. In this way, he describes it minutely. Through travel Seth has the complete knowledge of the problems that are faced by the people of the present age. He was deeply touched and aware of the rapidly changing social, economic and the political conditions. Seth has an immense variety. He is a man of varied moods, so his range is not confined to one or two subjects. He deals with all aspects of society. In spite of the immense variety of his moods, he portrays characters from middle class life.

Seth’s diction in *From Heaven Lake* is characterised by artless simplicity. His fiction has simplicity of both form and diction. His diction is rich graphically. His narrative technique is completely based on photographic narration. He describes the Chinese feature and the Tibetan religion, folks, and environment through photographic technique.

**Keywords:** - Technique, portray, descriptions, attitude, narrative, travel.

Vikram Seth, the poet and the novelist, was born in Calcutta, India, on 20th June 1952 in the family of Mr. Prem Nath Seth and Mrs. Leena Seth. As an exponent of Indo-English fiction, Seth has exhibited calibre in spear-heading a literary movement of its own kind. He is prolific writer and has written poems, stories and novels. He is recipient of Sahitya Academi Award, Commonwealth Writer’s Prize, W.H. Smith Prize and many other awards and

distinctions. He got world wide popularity. His works are widely accepted both in India and abroad. His travel literature is full of realism, irony and humour.

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Seth has an immense variety. He is a man of varied moods, so his range is not confined to one or two subjects. He deals with all aspects of society. In spite of the immense variety of his moods, he portrays characters from middle class life. The variety of levels conveyed in his descriptions is shown here under:

‘‘ These things now affect me more powerfully than I could ever have imagined; small blue hedge flowers of a type. I recognise but cannot name Lan – tana bushes, sal forests, water buffalo, trucks copiously ornamented with religious symbols and hopelessly overloaded with worldly goods, khaki clad policeman the bright clothes and familiar features of the people; a woman selling cucumber and chutney, to the passengers at a bus stop’’.(1)

Vikram Seth is a very skilful narrator. In ‘The Golden Gate’ he tells the story in a very interesting manner. He combines the various parts of the story skilfully. One part comes into another very naturally. If necessary, he separates the parts of story, but the thread of the story does not break at all. The factors which mostly attract his narration in the description are his simplicity and vernacular use of language. His description is perfect; these ultimately form the part of the novel. These are never too lengthy, or boring. These beautifully integrate the parts of the story. His description is of pictorial quality. In his stories, as well as novels, there are descriptions from human life of market, journey, temple, music party and from

nature and weather like scene of daybreak and evening.

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The picture portrayed by Seth in 'From Heaven Lake' of China and Tibet is true. He stayed there for a very little span of two years. In these two years, he became familiar with parts of China and went in depth of Chinese as well as Tibetan life. Particularly, he did work on the rural folk and minority areas of both China and Tibet. He also saw their superstitions and backwardness, the calm and simple beauty of Tibet and China and also its spiritual richness. His novel 'From Heaven Lake' reflects both the good and bad sides of China and Tibet, with its life and landscapes.

Seth experienced that foreigners are interesting characters to the Chinese people. They observed the strangers minutely. He writes: "One is often conscious of a minute examination of one's dress and behaviour upon first acquaintance. People passing on in the street stop to gape at dress and feature, one occasion even turning their heads round to stars and consequently, bumping in to bicycle or trees." (2).

Children are also curious about their foreign guests: "Children yell, waiguoren ! waiguoren ! as they catch sight of one, or waibin ! waibin ! (Foreign guest) if they are old enough to combine etiquette with excitement" (3).

They are also interested in the songs of the foreigners. They listen to their songs attentively. He describes : "These people often performed the programme of songs and dances in the courtyard of house. They take interest in Indian film actors. They mostly prefer Raj Kapoor and Nargis. They are well familiar, with Raj Kapoor. They say him to Laz Kapoor. 'Laz', it said in the magazine, is a big capitalist in real life, and has his own film

company’’ (4).

The description of Grand Mosque in Xian in ‘‘ From Heaven Lake’’ is vivid. The artificial decoration of Grand Mosque looks as natural. This Mosque is constructed in half Arabic and half Chinese style. During the cultural revolution of China, mosques were closed. Cupolas of the Mosque were destructed. Prayers were confined to the home alone, but after all that, they never betrayed from their religious path. They firmly believed in credo of Islam. Mohammed is the only prophet for the Muslim religious people. He writes: ‘‘ There were some services. But they were in private homes. You know, that is where women normally pray at home. So, it was not so difficult to arrange things, though, of course, they had to be held secretly. The whole flavour of our life changed during those years. We could hardly even eat meat, because none of the meat shop slaughtered in the prescribed manner. It was considered a vestige of feudal thought for us to maintain the custom’’. (5)

In Seth’s ‘‘ From Heaven Lake’’ we find the glimpses of the life of Chinese as well as Tibetan people during the Cultural Revolution. He describes Chinese legends, beliefs, and attitudes. Seth loves the common folk of China and Tibet. He is deeply sympathetic to these people. He, in his fiction, celebrates their tradition, their joys and sorrows, their way of working. He, later on, was emotionally moved with the lot of the Tibetan people when he knew that the life of these people had suffered in the Cultural Revolution.

Seth is novelist of ordinary human situations and common human relationships. His novel is not dealing with great and philosophical truths; it is dealing with day to day situations of common life. He can say exactly what he wants to, without even being aware of the basic rules of his writings. He presents the grim pictures of Cultural Revolution so daringly that readers are compelled to face this ultimate reality.

Vikram Seth handles the language with command and naturalness. He has developed his own unique style of writing. His writings reveal a very high level of intensity and

awareness of modern life. He commands: “ ‘ was there nothing good in the Cultural Revolution at all. I ask, some people mention that the only time they got travel, to see their country, was when they were Red Guards. And they say it out down on the worst abuse of beaurocracy’ ”. (6)

From Heaven Lake is an example of the union of simplicity and sublimity. The language is simple. Seth does not use unfamiliar words. He uses the languages of everyday life. The vocabulary is simple and easy. The language is easy to understand. The narration is direct and straightforward. There is no intricacy and complexity at all. He used words with caution. His use of words gives true picture of his moods and feelings. His diction reveals the mastery of his chosen medium. He has felicity of expression. He has also used the vernacular language. ‘Lianxi’ is a word as fundamental to an understanding of China as guiding is (regulation), to Guanxi (personal connections in official places). Waiguoran (out land persons) Waibin (foreign guest)’ (7) are examples of vernacular language.

Right words are used in the right place and not a single word is superfluous. His diction has an almost classical simplicity, austerity and perfection. Seth often used uncommon or archaic words in place of simple and familiar ones. He sometime expresses his thoughts in their native language. Such use of folk and Chinese words is quite appropriate in fiction, dealing with the life of the Chinese folk. “ ‘ Can you get bidis in Lhasa?’ ” I asked surprisingly. (Bidis are small Indian cigarettes, conical in shape with tobacco rolled up in a green tobacco leaf, something in the manner of cigar). “ ‘Not often’ ” says Gyanseng. “ ‘ A Nepalese merchant might bring a consignment across from time to time. But in the 1950, they were freely available’ ” (8).

In Seth’s From Heaven Lake there is the presence of the past. He often remembered Delhi in China. His familiar experience with the historical consciousness is a feature of Seth’s novel which runs consistently through it. Describing the cultural revolution, Lamaism

(Tibetan religion) and Buddhism, we get historical consciousness in his *From Heaven Lake*.

Seth presents family figure and family relationship in a good way. He met there two families, one Chinese and another Tibetan. In *Germu* he met Xiao San's family. Both his father and mother are doctors. That is well educated family. Seth was pleased at their hospitality. He describes: " throughout the meal, I am told that the food is very poor, and that my Chinese is very good, both of which make about equal sense" (9).

Seth met another family that is Tibetan. They are honest people. They took foreigners in confidence. They greeted Seth in very well manner. From there, Seth came to know about the Cultural Revolution. The words of family member, Morbu goes as: " Do you know what we have suffered here, for family, because of the Chinese and their cultural revolution. My father spent twelve years in prison, because of them. An uncle of mine was killed when they invaded Tibet" (10).

Seth describes family grief, sorrow and dejection. He also describes their feelings and thinking about Cultural Revolution. He presents before us what they suffered during the revolution.

The image of Heaven is also showed by Vikram Seth in his *From Heaven Lake*. When he went to Xian and visited the Grand Mosque, and declare sit to be a very peaceful place.

Seth's method of character delineation is superb, but what gives his characters their value, is the fact that it is through the character itself. His characters expose themselves in their own words, so that we know about them through and through, and can imagine them in situations in which he has described them. He has living characters. They are the representative of human nature. His characters do not reveal only their weaknesses and virtues inherent in human nature itself. His characters act in their distinguished way, they have their own kind of speech, their own way of saying and doing. One of the most important part of his characters is that they linger long in memory. They are mostly nostalgic ones. An

example here can be given in this regards: ‘‘ we are safe now, but we are ruined. We have almost nothing. Most of what we had was confiscated, and we got 300 yuan as compensation for what happened to us’’ (11). So his characters reveal what they have suffered in the past.

Through his art of characterisation, Seth portrays the Cultural Revolution and its effects; it is portrayed through the characters experiences. He takes characters those who had suffered the woes of the Cultural Revolution: ‘‘ All decency died during that time, and half the cultural heritage of China – books, temples, works of art was destroyed. I learnt a lot of things about life, and about how people behave; about how far, for instance, you could count on even your best friends to stick by you in times of troubles. Sometimes people wanted to, but they did not dare help. They feared for themselves and for their families’’ (12).

Seth is a psychological novelist. He represents the inner struggle of characters souls, and successfully reveals the emotions, motifs and the feelings. He always goes in depth and discovers how the things happen. At Norbulingka, Seth got an opportunity to meet a family and describes their inner struggle as well as inner feelings. Their family had suffered imprisonment during the Cultural Revolution. Norbu say: ‘‘ Now, at least, we have been completely cleared, but you cannot imagine what it was like for us during those years. My father came home. He was a wrath, not surprising, considering that during his years in prison, he got only a couple of *liang of sampa* a day not enough to fill even half that tea cup. We sent food in, but it never got to him’’ (13).

Seth’s novel deals with all the facts of contemporary life, both pleasant and unpleasant, the beautiful and ugly, and does not present merely a one-sided view of life. His novel presents realistically the doubts, the conflicts and the frustration of modern life. The sufferings of poor, their wretchedness, their sympathy and social consciousness are realistically presented.

Seth’s novel is not only an entertainment, but it has a special art form. It is integrated

in form, and everything superfluous is carefully avoided. His fiction is well constructed.

At the last of his *From Heaven Lake* Seth seems to give a message of universal brotherhood. He also aspires for the friendship of China and India. Both the countries should develop their mutual understanding because friendship rests on mutual good will. According to Seth, it is not necessary that the relationship between the two countries can be improved also by the other groups, besides the politicians. The visitors, consisting of different groups, might help in improving the relations. The comment of Quzha is valuable in reference of Indo-China relationship: “ I am glad, things have improved in our relations” (14).

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