ABSTRACT: Vikram Seth’s *From Heaven Lake*, basically is Seth’s journey through cultural paradigms to China, Tibet, Nepal and finally to his own country India. It was a chance hitch hiking that leads him through the natural landscapes and amidst a section of Chinese people, culture which he would never have come across Nanging University. He learns about the people who live far away from the cities leading a hard life. It was mere boredom that made him take the unnatural road where he has to take the cheapest mode of transport to reach India, even bribe officials with Bollywood songs to visit a place which otherwise was a dream for many other as China put many restrictions to foreigners visiting Tibet. Witnessing the after effects of Cultural Revolution was also an experience by itself. Gathering around informations to the places he visits and relating them to his country was the mainstay of his journey.

Keywords: Chinese provinces, cultural Revolution, immersed, oriental cultures, travelogue.

I. Introduction:

Vikram Seth’s *From Heaven Lake* is a journey undertaken when he was a student at Nanjing University from 1980 to 1982. During the summer recess of 1981, he returned home to Delhi via Nepal and Tibet. And on the way he took a hitchhiking journey through land route in various trucks, originated in the oasis of northwest China and to Himalayas crossing four Chinese provinces, Qinghai and Tibet. The travelogue, he says, is based on the journal that he kept and the photographs which he took on the journey.

*From Heaven Lake* is Vikram Seth’s leisurely journey account of his travels and traverses through the natural landscapes which are pure descriptions of natural landscapes of Chinese people, culture and traditions specially with those Chinese people with whom he struck friendship. He did not take the usual routes, he followed the routes usually not taken by tourists. As a result he came across people who are from the diversified society, he stopped on those off routes, made friendships and learnt about their lifestyles, feelings and urges. This is why the travelogue represents a large variety of Chinese working class people including Hans, Uighurs, Kazakhs, Muslims, Confucians, Buddhists, mothers, young children, young men and...
women, Christians, petty officials, shopkeepers, and truck-drivers. Its basically these working class male people who dominate his travelogue. For this journey, he used the cheapest mode of transport and as such stops here and there, joins people in their local fervour and gaiety. The truck driver Sui with whom he travels on his long journey introduces him to his many friends and relatives with whom they spend nights and meal times. Some of Sui’s friends with whom he spends time are, Norbu, the young Tibetan at Lhasa; Gyanseng, the Tibetan co-passenger on the truck and Sui’s fifteen year old nephew Xiao San. The book is set in a communal setting, and it describes people, conversations, food and natural scenery with a great deal of affection.

II. Objectives of the Study:


V. Discussion:

Seth was a twenty-nine year old PhD student of Economics doing research in Agriculture in Nanjing University in the early 1980s. Seth was in the batch of foreign students allowed to study in China under Deng’s leadership. Seth’s travelogue opens a window to China just after the Cultural Revolution, a decade before the Tiananmen square massacre. The official ideological perspective on foreigners is laced with apprehension:

‘Officialdom treats the foreigner 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, do too much on its own, or influence the behaviour of the local inhabitants.(From Heaven Lake).’

The curiosity regarding the hitchhiker among the Chinese people is genuinely highlighted in their friendliness and their going out of way to help him. The fact that Seth is an Indian gears up both their friendliness and curiosity and specially since the Indo-China war was just a few years behind, a gathering curiosity marked the young stranger amongst them, an apprehension rather laced up with some suspicious though judgemental.

*From Heaven Lake* has two sets of travel- the first journey is the official tour of the foreign students to the deserts of Turfan, Heaven lake and Xian organized by the Chinese government. Here, Seth’s travels begin right in the middle of the desert. The second journey takes us straight to a middle of a hot July morning into the Turfan desert. The travelogue is Seth’s first prose but displays maturity, confidence, narration and description, it is far ahead.
Seth gets tired of his group and leaves them to move freely and goes to Heaven lake, Tian Chi, a mountain region of great natural beauty which he later gives the book name. Seth has carried with him two books in his travel throughout China - translation of Confucius’s ‘Analects and the other is V S Naipaul’s India: A Wounded Civilization.

Seth is completely immersed in the beauty of the Heaven Lake, he cannot but appreciate Confucius’ student in the ‘Analects who gives the following answer to his Master’s question as to what he would want to do to prove his abilities to the world: ’In late spring, after the spring clothes have been newly made, I should like, together with five or six adults and six or seven boys, to go bathing in the River Yi and enjoy the breeze on the Rain Altar and then go home chanting poetry. The quotation sets the pace for the narration of experiences and also enjoy the hospitality and warmth of the Chinese people. He also learns about their ways and culture of life. His meetings with a young Muslim scholar in a mosque at Xian makes him know the kind of life they led during the Cultural Revolution. Again his meeting with Norbu and his family in Lhasa makes him understand the horror of Chinese onslaught on the Tibetan people.

Seth has keen sensory flights as well as observance details. Xinjiang is a desert province with the huge Tarim Basin at its centre and Turfan is basically as oasis town in Xinjiang and the agriculture of this area mainly depends on subterranean water-resources preserved and transported through an ancient construction system. Study of this was one of the academic reasons for the tour. Learning about the economical aspect of the area was largely a consideration for the student group. Seth takes off his shoes, shirt and drops them into a karez, a narrow underground tunnel that brings water from the mountains. Seth’s kindled daringness was witnessed by the others in the group and the official tour guide is horrified. But Seth has no problem in handling of the locals, he handles them quite well.

“Seth is aware of the fact that Xinjiang is populated by non-Hans. A part of the ancient Silk Route, the province has retained many of its ancient Buddhist and Islamic monuments. Settled or nomadic Seth has keen sensory flights as well as observance details. Xinjiang is a desert province with the huge Tarim basin at communities of Uighurs and Kazakhs live in what Seth terms the ‘historical no-man’s land of Central Asia’, pacified by the Chinese, some two thousand years ago’. Seth finds that these people who follow Islam and its cultural traditions have little in common with the Han majority of China. Their features are more marked, racially more akin as they are to the Turks, their dress is more colourful and the script of the Uighur language is Arabic. Seth’s limited understanding of Urdu is useful in his interactions with them.”

It was the cultural event at the hotel in the evening which resulted in Seth’s visit to Tibet, a country forbidden ‘autonomous region’ to foreigners except by special permission for
People had to pay exorbitant charges to visit these places. Only Seth managed to visit this place without doing so. He managed the permission by lucky chance. The Chinese people had great liking for Raj Kapoor and Seth obliged the group in the hotel by singing a song from “Awara” which led to the endorsement to Lhasa on his passport. Seth’s Awara song lends him cheers, and finally on a morning walk he walks to the market and enters the police station on an impulse to find an endorsement to Tibet charmed by the Hindi song he sang. Nonetheless he was happy.

Seth’s second journey is after the official journey. After reaching Nanjing University, Seth just has a day to prepare for the long and risky journey to Tibet. He knows he has to take an overland journey and just had a month’s time for the new route which was his new journey plan. Seth wrote to his parents about the change of plans and told them he will return through an interesting route. He takes him with the necessary documents to reach Liuyuan his final destination by train. Seth hitchikes trucks to travel to travel to Lhasa and on the way meets people and places.

As Seth saunters on to reach Lhasa, he regrets that he did not have much knowledge on Tibetan religion, history and culture. He casually moves,

“For all the enthusiasm with which I am undertaking this journey. I am conscious that I know almost nothing about Tibet. My understanding of what i see will lack the counterpoint of expectation, of a previous comprehension, however fragmentary. I have always wanted to go to Tibet, yet I know that this is largely due to the glamour surrounding the unknown. About Tibetan religion I know very little; and I will have to learn about the climate and geography at first hand. I have no Tibetan friends. A picture of the Potala, Tibetan dancers seen in Darjeeling, an article or two in the newspapers about the Dalai Lama, chance remarks made since my childhood: it is of scraps such as these that my idea of Tibet is composed. And in one sense my purpose is not to travel in Tibet, but merely pass through it ‘coming home’ as I write to my parents, ‘by a more interesting route.’”

The train journey to Liuyuan is the beginning of his long trek to Lhasa and from here on by road. It is a dusty streets and truck traffic route Lhasa is around 1800 kms far from Liuyuan. He travels by truck to Germu and to Qinghai and finally Lhasa. As he gets off, Seth does not have the slightest idea how he would travel. Seth’s travel pass and residence permit expire and he has to be in Delhi.

Seth with the help of a chance acquaintance arranges a hitchhike in a truck. His companion in this journey to Lhasa is the thirty five years old driver Sui, his fifteen year old nephew Xiao San and a Tibetan Gyanseng. Seth suddenly leads to a haphazard lifestyle in Sui’s truck, uncomfortable in the cramped place. Sui does everything as it fancies. Flood also
proves an obstacle and they are slowed by a couple of days. Seth has to face cold and headache at a high altitude of five thousand metres above sea-level.

One hundred fifty kilometres from Lhasa, their truck is trapped in mushy earth. Seth needs a specific exit permission to cross the Tibetan border into India and the Lhasa – Kathmandu bridge has been damaged by floods. Seth almost gave up, but took the advice of the Nepalese Consulate General Mr. Shah who suggested him alternative route to go to Nilamu by truck and walk four days through the hills, then cross the Tibetan border to Nepal on foot, Seth is filled with joy.

In fact Seth completely absorbs in the new things that he comes to know-rituals, history and religion. The details of the Cultural Revolution make the narrative interesting. Infact, as Seth saunters of with a Nepalese guide, a Nepalese customs officer tells him by crossing the stream, he has crossed the border and reached India. The familiar landscape gives him a new strength.

Seth’s *From Heaven Lake* is an exotic journey- China to Tibet to Nepal then to Delhi. The return home is distance cover more makes the journey very enterprising. *From Heaven Lake*, a travelogue uncovers a real China which is consuming the whole world. The travelogue tries to present the oriental cultures, its exoticness purposively to wrest the civilized and western traveller. Seth’s introduction as’ I am Indian’, he presents a liberal ideology and his reading of Naipaul’s, ‘An Area of Darkness’ where the comparison of India’ is from a politico-economic framework frames this background.

Seth has been perceived as a cosmopolitan, liberal Western humanist. His solitariness is painted as the tradition of European romantic traveller. His walks and perpetuation in literature are seen as a gazer and discoverer of newer perspectives. Nandini Chandra differentiates between the Western traveller ‘who seeks to find an original essence or untarnished self in these remote lands’ and the cosmopolitans of the subcontinent, whether rooted or exiled, who are more interested in recovering marginal histories and suppressed voices,’ (Chandra 2004: 22).

Seth’s main intention is to decipher the real China from its veil of ideology trying to discover the essences of the history in its real self as evident in the official as evident in the Official histories. He does feel after what he uncovered that there is really a Chinese way of thinking. Nandini Chander indirectly though accuses Seth that being located in Metropolitan University, he seeks to separate himself from the regular tourists and seek ’to recover the pulse of the common people.’ He senses the loss of the destroyed temples, mosques and the cultural life of the people during Cultural Revolution and his distaste for totalitarianism ideologies are seen as his attempts to discover the real China, that’s why he portrays the common Chinese and Tibetan people.
Seth’s travel makes one transport to the place in a lived imagination. Seth’s way of dealing with the people in foreign lands and the compassion and respect he partakes is about his cosmopolitan way of bringing up. Cosmopolitan is Seth’s economic and social privilege and his way of making himself accept in that world. Seth does not accrue to anything but envisage his own country. He is a pure humanist who softly enters the other world easily. From Heaven Lake has a familiar surrounding of Seth’s world of humanism relating to the universal bonding to enjoy the natural world. Again, the flute in the midst of Kathmandu city lends a common musical universal. Seth feels, to hear any flute, is to be drawn into the commonality of all mankind, to be moved by music closest in its phrases and sentences to the human voice. Its motive force too is living breath, where one needs to pause and breathe.

VI. Conclusion:
Seth reflects that if India and China were ‘amicable towards each other, almost half the world would be at peace’, yet he knows that, constrained by geography, the heartlands of these two great cultures have had almost no contact with each other in history. Seth was writing in the early 1980s and sought patience and respect between the two nations. He feels to know and learn another great culture is to enrich one’s life. The Indo-China War does have scars left behind which slowly are being erased and new ways sought to venture into each other’s world, because both are power in their own way, India edging out of the English visage and formulating her own identity.

To a large extent, Seth is influenced by Naipaul’s analysis of Indian civilization and influences his sentiments in From Heaven Lake. Naipaul’s writing makes Seth realise the relative economic and political achievements of the two large overpopulated nation,

“I remember reading a question in an economics textbook: :If you were to be born tomorrow, would you prefer to be born in China or India?” if i could be guaranteed the lucky place in the Indian sweepstakes that I at present occupy, there is no question as to what my answer would be: even if I were poorer than the average Chinese child I would still prefer to be in India. But if I were born to the inhuman, dehumanizing misery in which the poorest third of our people live, to the squalor and despair and debility that is their life, my answer would not be the same. Man does not, of course, live by bread alone, but with so little of it he can hardly be said to live at all.”

Seth has not developed nor is he trying to identify the Maoist ideology which plays an important role in Chinese way of life. He condemns Cultural Revolution for its destruction of Chinese historical and cultural legacy, he feels for which China lost a huge wealth. It was hunger, destitution and economic disparity that led to the rise of Mao and the Communist
beliefs. A lot has changed since Seth’s *From Heaven Lake*. 21st century has seen both India and China expanding liberalization and globalization, both have become huge powers, underlining of cold demeanour is always there.

**References:**

