

From Heaven Lake- Travels through Sinkiang and Tibet- As a Travel Literature

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Abstract:

The travel literature has emerged as one of the most admired and interesting genres during the last decade of twentieth century. The travelogue, *The Heaven Lake* has nicely presented the long loving relationship between India and China. They have witnessed great civilization and have deep respect for each other. Vikram Seth, the narrator of the travelogue, was the student of Nanjing University in China from 1980- 82. He visited several places of China and narrated his experience.

Key Words: Travel Literature, *Waiguoren*, *Lingado*, *Mahavanjyadoot*, *Laam*, Alif

The travel literature has emerged as one of the most admired and fascinating genres during the last decade of the twentieth century. The travel literature is synonymous with travelogue. The word was first used by Burton Holmes. He was an American traveler, photographer and film maker. *From heaven Lake Travels through Sinkiang and Tibet* is written by Vikram Seth. Seth describes the global player and ancient giant China in this travelogue. He has depicted political, social and religious behavior of Chinese people. The travelogue has nicely presented the long, loving relationship of India and China. Both India and China witnessed the mighty oriental civilization. Travel literature has significance and literary value. In the travelogue *From Heaven Lake*, Seth has narrated his travel experience which he enjoyed during the journey. The Chinese people are friendly. They had great admiration for Raj Kapoor and Nargis. They loved to see the iconic film *Awara* of the actor and actress.

Seth was the student of Nanjing University in China from 1980 to 1982. As a researcher and student of the Chinese university, he got the opportunity to visit different provinces and places of China. Vikram Seth began his journey from Turfan. Turfan is the deserted town of the Chinese province of Xinjiang. This town was called Turfan. The ancient province was called the silk route between China and Mediterranean countries of Europe during early period, in the early chapters of the travelogue, Seth has simply depicted the natural beauty of Turfan. He has also depicted the people, their language and dress. Through the eyes of Vikran Seth, we come to see the divine beauty of *Karez*. The *Karez* is divine beauty is blessed to China by the almighty nature. As narrator says about it.

I walk slowly, groping along the slippery clay walls, bumping against the low roof. The light dies. I am guided solely by my hands and submerged feet, both suddenly numb and cold. There is a slight bend in the *Karez*, I realize there are no branches in the channel.

Seth has depicted the beautiful nature of Chinese people. The Chinese children have a special fascination for the foreigners. They yelled the word *Waiguoren* to foreigners. The attitude of Chinese government towards the foreigners was critical. They disliked the hobnobbing of Chinese

people with the foreigners. After Turfan, Seth came to Urumqi. Urumqi had a special distinction in China. The place is famous for scenic beauty and horse race. The countryside of this place has a heavenly bliss. The agricultural fields have dazzling beauty of sunflowers. The place is also called Heaven Lake. The heaven Lake is about 2000 meters above sea level. Seth narrates the beauty of Heaven's Lake:

Heaven Lake is long, sardine- shaped and fed by snowmelt form of a stream at its head. The lake is intense blue, surrounded by all sides by green mountain walls, dotted by distant sheep. At the head of the lake, beyond the delta of the in- flowing stream, is snow- capped peak which dominated the vista; it is a part of a series of peaks that culminate a little of view, in Mount Bogoda itself. (22)

After Urumqi, Seth came to Xian. Xian holds historical and cultural significance in Chinese civilization. The place was once capital of China. The place is famous for Chinese calligraphic inscription. The historical place of Xian saw the decline of mighty empire when the Chinese emperor Ming Huang committed the blunder. He destroyed the empire because of his unethical temptation for beautiful women. Seth saw the mosque on the streets of Xian. The mosque was guarded by the Muslim men. When Seth tried to enter in the mosque, he was stopped. Later a man of twenty-five came and talked with Seth. Seth entered the campus of the mosque along with him. The young man narrated the injustice committed by the Red Guards. They prohibited the Imams to do religious activity. He came to know that Seth is from India. He asked Seth whether he could read the vertical of '*laam*' and '*alif*'. Seth replied that he could read Arabic but very slowly. After leaving the mosque, Seth decided to go to Liyuan. While shopping in Liyuan, Seth was noticed by two Chinese people. They anticipated that Seth was a tourist. Seth wanted to go to Lhasa. It was very difficult for non- Chinese people to get permission to enter Lhasa. However, Seth obtained permission. The next morning Seth met his two American friends. They had come from Dunhuang. The place is famous for Buddhist teachings and monasteries. Seth wanted to go to Lhasa but without hope. His hope raised when he met Quzha. He promised help to Seth. He introduced Seth to a truck driver Sui. He was a Han Chinese, aged thirty-five. He was accompanied by Xiao San, his sister's son and Gyanseng, a Tibetan. Seth became the third person to get the lift in the truck. Seth was only 180 kilometers away from Lhasa. Seth came to know about the terrible cold to the way to Lhasa. He entered in the shop. He wanted to buy a new warm clothe. The sales representative refused to take money given by Seth. After the intervention of the manager, the money was taken by the sales representative. Seth noticed that he had missed his luggage. They came back once again to Dunhuang. Seth saw that the luggage lied on the roadside. The luggage was collected by Seth from the roadside. They began their journey from Dunhuang once again. Dunhuang is the fertile land. The pork was easily available in Dunhuang. The Muslim did not take pork. On the way, Seth faced flood. When the flood water receded in Dunhuang, Seth proceeded for further journey. Sui and Seth visited to Sui's friend on their way to Lhasa. Here, Seth saw a beautiful lake. Seth narrates the beauty of lake.

There are actually two lakes, I discover, both fed by springs. There is a larger, broader, very clear lake below, and above it a narrower, serpentine lake of yet more amazing cleanliness almost as pure as Heaven Lake, near Urumqi. (69)

After meeting Sui's friend, in Nanhu, Seth crossed the Dangling pass. They crossed the province of Gansu and Qinghai. They reached Chaidam Basin. Life in this region of China is very difficult because of extreme cold. The pebbles and socks are scattered in this land. The rough weather also

affected the army people. Seth saw only camels in the Chaidam Basin. Seth and Sui, the driver of the truck reached Germu at 1p.m. The police stopped them. The police became suspicious of Seth. The Chinese Administration became alert to see Seth. They asked several questions to Seth. The police ask;

“What is your name? Your Chinese name?”

“Xin Binlang. And yours?” I ask conversationally. He ignores this.

“What is your unit?”

“Nanjing University”

“Oh. And do they know you are here in Germu?”

“I very much doubt it”

“Are you here to do research?”

“No. I am here to....”

“Are you here for any other special purpose?”

“Special purpose? What do you mean?”

“I mean.... On study trip, something your university has sanctioned” “No, I’m just travelling.” (77)

Germu is one of the most strategically located places of China Sui’s brother-in-law and sister lived in Germu. Sui’s sister was a doctor. His brother-in-law was a surgeon. They were Han Chinese, the ruling race of China. Seth has explained the distinct quality of Han Chinese people.

I have noticed that the Han are in general very reserved people. They do not wear bright clothes. The slightest non- conformist behavior is stared and commented upon. (86)

The people of India and China enjoyed glorious past. From Germu, Seth proceeded to Southern Qinghai, the place had very cruel weather. The road was worst. Seth did not sleep even for a single minute because of the worst weather. After the hazardous journey, Seth reached the Northern Tibet. He needed to cover one hundred kilometers to reach China. In Tibet, the narrator noticed that poverty was prevalent among the people. Gyanseng, the person who accompanied Seth, became happy. The chapter is remarkable as the narrator shows the monstrous face of the Cultural Revolution. During the revolution, China destroyed her glorious past. Sui, the driver of the truck was moody. He stopped the truck for fishing. Seth disliked it as he had very less time and left the truck. Seth was lifted by another truck but once again he felt problem. He got lift from another truck because of the kindness of driver. The truck reached its destination Lhasa. Seth met the *lingado* Mr. Ho. He was a good human being. He understood the serious financial trouble of Seth. He arranged accommodation for the narrator only applicable for Chinese and not for the foreigners. Later, he met *Mahavanijyadoot* of Nepal, Mr. Shah. Seth had no time but he had to leave Chinese soil. Mr. Shah heard the woeful condition of Seth. Seth said that he had the exit visa from China but the name of the place was not mentioned. He wanted to go to India via Nepal. Even Seth had no money to board the flight. Mr. Shah told about the whimsical, diplomatic behavior of the Chinese government. They behaved in erratic manner. Though China and Nepal shared border, the government of Nepal was not confident of Chinese administration. Mr. Shah showed him every minute detail of the path, river and tributaries on the map. Seth saw everything like a mesmerized pigeon.

After meeting with Mr. Shah, the narrator visited the Norbulinga park. He met a Tibetan youth, Norbu. Norbu was a man of amicable nature. He had a great fascination for English. His

family was the worst sufferer of Cultural Revolution. His father and uncle were jailed. His uncle died in the jail. During his stay in Lhasa, Seth visited Potla and Drepung. He also visited Sera monastery. Here he saw the unique way to give last rites to the dead. The body of the dead is chopped into big pieces. They are boiled and mixed with barley. The pieces are given to waiting vultures to eat.

The date of exit visa was about to end. Seth was summoned by the Police Officer Zhao. She wanted to know the exit plan of Seth. Seth was given all relevant and adequate information concerning the exit by Mr. Shah. Seth's exit plan was accepted by Zhao. The narrator observed that the average Chinese people were friendly with Indians. The narrator boarded the truck and came to Shigatse. From Shigatse to Nilamu. Later he came to Zhangmu. He was troubled by the driver Wu but it was sorted out by the local police station. Zhangmu is the border of Nepal and China. Later from Zhangmu, Seth proceeded to Kathmandu. He took flight from Kathmandu to Delhi.

The travelogue *From Heaven Lake* is fascinating and interesting. The troubles undertaken by Seth never exhausted him. He loved and liked his journey. He admired the generosity of average Chinese people except the politically influenced administration. Seth remarks:

If India and China were amicable towards each other, almost half the country would be at peace. Yet friendship rests on understanding; and the two countries despite their contiguity, have had almost not content in the course of history. (178)

References:

1. *From Heaven Lake- Travel through Sinkiang and Tibet* Vikram Seth (New Delhi, Penguin Books, 1990) P.08. All subsequent references to the book will be incorporated in the text.