

Exile and Loneliness in the Poetry of Vikram Seth

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With no companion to my mood,
Against the wind as it should be,
I walk, but in my solitude
Bow to the wind that buffets me.

(*The Wind*, Vikram Seth)

Abstract

Poetry is the language of human feelings and emotions. In the ancient Indian Tradition, it is supposed to be the highest art as the *Fifth Veda*. In 20th century, after the end of Colonialism, Modern English poetry in India emerged as a part of modernization and reflected the change that had ushered in among the Indian poets. Gradually with passing of time, Indian English poetry has matured from a sapling to a firmly rooted tree and became more indianized in Nature.

Indian English literature has abundance of second generation Indian English poets and Vikram Seth is a giant in versatility amongst them. He is a poet, novelist, travel writer, biographer and memoirist. Seth has published six volumes of poetry: *Mappings* (1980), *The Humble Administrator's Garden* (1985), *All You Who Sleep Tonight* (1990), *Beastly Tales* (1991), *Three Chinese Poets* (1992) and *The Frog and the Nightingale* (1994). In his poetry, he explores all the themes: love, friendship, loneliness, loss, expatriation, nature, social consciousness, nostalgia, detachment and exile effectively. But travelling in various countries, living in various locations and interacting with numerous cultures has made the theme of loneliness and exile prominent in his poetry. The proposed paper will deal with loneliness and exile as prominent themes in the poetry of Vikram Seth.

Keywords: Exile, Loneliness, Sapling, Nostalgic, Detachment

The history of Indian writing in English is a development from poetry to prose and from romantic idealization to various modernistic forms, passing through the phases of imitation, assimilation to authentic artistic utterance and experimentation. In a country with its own ancient, sophisticated and richly inclusive civilization, the continued and extended use of English for creative purpose is an extraordinary fact of national and linguistic life. It is a powerful testimony to the expressive and creative power of the Indian writers in quantity and quality. It compares well with the best of poetry in Indian literature as well as English literature. Overcoming the problems of language, identity, audience, publishers, the need for roots and hope for the future the Indian English poets have greatly contributed to the development of English literature and commonwealth literature.

Indian English literature (IEL) refers to the body of work by writers in India who write in English language and whose native or co-native language could be one of the numerous languages of India. It is also associated with the works of members of the Indian Diaspora, such as V.S. Naipaul and Salman Rushdie, who are of Indian descent. Their contemporaries in English poetry in India were Jayanta Mahapatra, Gieve Patel, A. K. Ramanujan, Rajagopal Parthasarathy, Keki Daruwala, Adil Jussawala, Arun Kolatkar, Dilip Chitre,

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P. Lal and Kamala Das among several others. A generation of exiles also sprang from the Indian diaspora. Among these are names like Agha Shahid Ali, Sujata Bhatt, Melanie Silgado, Sudeep Sen, Yuyutsu Sharma and Vikram Seth.

Vikram Seth was born on 20 June 1952 in a Punjabi family to Leila and Prem Seth in Calcutta (now Kolkata). His family lived in many cities including the Bata Shoe Company town of Batanagar, Danapur near Patna, and in London.

Vikram Seth is a poet who has been writing poetry for last two decades; he spent part of his youth in London but returned to his homeland in 1957. After receiving primary and commencing secondary education at the Doon School in Dehradun in India, Seth returned to England to Tonbridge School. From there, Seth studied philosophy, politics, and economics at Corpus Christi College, Oxford, where he developed an interest in poetry and learned Chinese. After leaving Oxford, Seth moved to California to work on a graduate degree in economics at Stanford University. He then went on to study creative writing at Stanford and classical Chinese poetry at Nanjing University in China.

Seth self-identifies as bisexual. In 2006, he became a leader of the campaign against India's Section 377, a law against homosexuality. Having lived in London for many years, Seth now maintains residences near Salisbury, England, where he is a participant in local literary and cultural events, having bought and renovated the house of the Anglican poet George Herbert in 1996, and in Delhi, where he lives with his parents and keeps his extensive library and papers.

The study of world literature might be the study of the way in which cultures recognize themselves through their projections of 'otherness', where, once, the transmission of national traditions was the major theme of a world literature. But writing is one of the most interesting and strategic ways in which diaspora might disrupt the binary of local and global and problematize national, racial and ethnic formulations of identity.

Displacement, whether forced or self-imposed, is in many ways a calamity. Yet, a peculiar but a potent point to note is that writers in their displaced existence generally tend to excel in their work, as if the changed atmosphere acts as a stimulant for them. These writings in dislocated circumstances are often termed as exile literature. The word 'exile' has negative connotations but if the self-exile of a Byron is considered, then the response to that very word becomes ambivalent. If a holistic view of the word 'exile' is taken, the definition would include migrant writers and non-resident writers and even gallivanting writers who roam about for better pastures to graze and fill their oeuvre. World literature has an abundance of writers whose writings have prospered while they were in exile.

Speaking about the contribution of Indian diasporic writers, Amitav Ghosh states in "The Diaspora in Indian Culture": "The modern Indian diaspora ... is not merely one of the most important forces in world culture ... the diaspora also counts among its members some of the world's finest writers" (The Imam and the Indian).

John Simpson in *The Oxford Book of Exile* writes that exile "is the human condition; and the great upheavals of history have merely added physical expression to an inner fact" (Simpson, "Introduction"). Indeed it is so if exile is taken to be identical with self-alienation in the modern, post-Marxist, Brechtian sense of the term. Physical mobility often heightens the spiritual or psychological sense of alienation from the places one continually moves between. The world, in existentialist terms, appears absurd and indifferent towards one's needs. In such a situation one cannot help but feel like an outsider. Therefore, it is well agreed that exile is a part of the human experience.

The effect that exile has, not on the writers' work, but on the writers themselves seems apparently paradoxical at first. Exile appears both as a liberating experience as well as a shocking experience. Whatever may be the geographical location of the exiled writer, in the mental landscape the writer is forever enmeshed among the strings attached to poles that pull in opposite directions. The only way the writer can rescue oneself from the tautness of the enmeshing strings is by writing or by other forms of artistic expression. Even if a writer consciously tries to justify one end, simultaneously, but unconsciously, there arises a longing for the other. Therein lies the fascination of exile literature. Vikram Seth has made his name while residing abroad.

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He has expressed his sense of displacement—a perennial theme in all exile literature—in his poems. His concerns are global concerns as today's world is afflicted with the problems of immigrants, refugees, and all other exiles. These exilic states give birth to the sense of displacement and rootlessness. His poetry demonstrates that the inner needs of all human beings are the same. Seth's contemplation on joy and happiness, on life and problems of life, on distress, loneliness and uncertainty as well as on a studied assessment of existence has taken a singular turn in the poem "Close of Play." He expressed his emotions in 'Breed' and 'Homeless' where he finds himself nowhere at home:

I know that the whole world
Means exile for our breed
Who are not home at home
And are abroad abroad. (*Mappings*, p. 68)

The Humble Administrator's Garden is a collection perfectly suited for reading in the still hours prior to midnight. With a mixture of muted and terse tones, Seth mingles memory and nostalgia with agreeable detail. These qualities make the poems primarily visual and reflective.

I envy those
Who have a house of their own,
Who can say their feet
Rest on what is theirs alone,
Who do not live on sufferance
In strangers' shells,
As my family has all our life,
And as I probably will. (*Homeless*, *The Humble Administrator's Garden*, p. 43)

From California
Sunday night in the house.
The blinds drawn, the phone dead.
The sound of the kettle, the rain.
Supper: cheese, celery, bread.

For company, old letters
In the same disjointed script.
Old love wells up again,
All that I thought had slipped

Through the sieve of long absence
Is here with me again:
The long stone walls, the green
Hillsides renewed with rain.

It seems I started this poem
So many years ago
I can't follow its ending
And must begin anew.....

The lack of hope or faith:
 Neither is justified.
 I have closed out the night.
 The random rain outside

Rejuvenates the parched
 Foothills along the Bay.
 Anaesthetized by years
 I think of you today

Not with impassionedness
 So much as half a smile
 To see the weathered past
 Still worth my present while.

("From California", *The Humble Administrator's Garden*, p. 61)

Seth's work "All You Who Sleep Tonight" represents the bulk of his poetic forms from translations to epigrams. His themes range from the thoughtful to the humorous. Many of Seth's previous themes of remembering, detachment, observation, and exile coalesce here. The first section of poems, aptly titled "Romantic Residues", are written at a distance where coping with ended relationships has become, what amounts to, a recalled gesture.

The poems are more or less witty, quatrains which will give delight. Little epiphanies are scattered through out. And the closing title poem sums up the exile's joy in sharing his lucubratory poems with those who are also in exile. In his first collection of poems, *Mappings*, Seth reveals his anxiety over his nomadic lifestyle in the poem "Diwali":

"The whole world means exile for our breed
 Who are not at home at home
 And are abroad abroad."

With no companion to my mood,
 Against the wind as it should be,
 I walk, but in my solitude
 Bow to the wind that buffets me.
 (The Wind, *All You Who Sleep Tonight*, p. 82)

All you who sleep tonight
 Far from the ones you love,
 No hand to left or right
 And emptiness above -

Know that you aren't alone
 The whole world shares your tears,

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Some for two nights or one,
And some for all their years.
(*All You Who Sleep Tonight*, p. 83)

The road is dark, and home is far.
Sleep now, in the poor state you are.
Tonight be dreamless, and tomorrow
Wake free from fear, half-free of sorrow.
(*Dark Road, All You Who Sleep Tonight*, p. 58)

Apart from theme of Exile, Loneliness seems to be a recurring theme in the writings of Seth.

A dreadful loneliness
Came over me when she had gone. My mind
Ran at high speed, my body kept behind.
I saw the shadowy forms of people, some
Were ghosts, some scarecrows, all were wordless,
Dumb-

(A Doctor's Journal Entry for August 6, 1946, *All You Who Sleep Tonight*, p. 33)

Like stars that rise when the other has set,
For years we two friends have not met.
How rare it is then that tonight
We once more share the same lamplight.
Our youth has quickly slipped away
And both of us are turning grey.
Old friends have died, and with a start
We hear the sad news, sick at heart.

(To Wei Ba, Who has lived away from the court, *All You Who Sleep Tonight*, p. 19)

Awake for hours and staring at the ceiling
Through the unsettled stillness of the night
He grows possessed of the obsessive feeling
That dawn has come and gone and brought no light.
(*Night Watch, All You Who Sleep Tonight* p. 62)

Protocols

What can I say to you? How can I retract

All that that fool my voice has spoken

-
Now that the facts are plain, the placid surface cracked,

The protocols of friendship broken?

I cannot walk by day as now I walk at dawn

Past the still house where you lie sleeping.

May the sun burn these footprints on the lawn

And hold you in its warmth and keeping.

In an interview Seth admitted:

"Yes. I was mostly in California while I was writing the book that's set there (*The Golden Gate*). Then I was in Europe while I was writing *An Equal Music*, which is set in England. And of course, I was in India while writing *A Suitable Boy*. I couldn't *imagine* writing it anywhere else.... But the actual ramifications of that remark are quite complex. I wrote, for example, the poems called *Shared Ground* not while I was actually in Salisbury but in Noida, you know, hearing the dogs barking (*laughs*)! So, while I am influenced by the place, it isn't an entirely depictable connection, sometimes it's illogical, sometimes it's almost contrary."

The Golden Gate is written in the form of sonnets. Seth tries to expose the empty promise of this life and highlights the dichotomy between outer success and inner angst. In the first sonnet, John, a successful yuppie, wonders: "if I died, who'd be sad? Who'd weep? ... would anybody?" The sonnet introduces a disquieting note in the novel from the outset, which also becomes its central preoccupation: the character's search for love and meaning in an affluent society where loneliness predominates:

Dark night, and silent, calm, and lovely,

That stills the efforts of our lives,

Rare, excellent-kind, and behovely

No matter how the poet strives

To weave with epithets and clauses

Your soundless web, he falters, pauses,

And your enchantment slips between

His hands, as if it's never been.

Of all times most imbued with beauty,

You lend us by your spell relief

From ineradicable grief

(If for a spell), and pain, and duty.

We sleep, and nightly are made whole

In all our fretted mind and soul.

(Vikram Seth, "The Golden Gate")

Seth, if anything ties his work together, it is the rootless, detached quality of the teller. In his observations, there is a charged distance which draws the reader in just enough to feel unconnected. His poetry is full of theme of exile and loneliness and we can say that his longing for home and family is prominent in poems.

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