



08

**AWAARA HOON: A STUDY OF VIKRAM SETH'S COSMOPOLITAN  
TRAVELOGUE FROM HEAVEN LAKE**

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**Abstract**

*The paper aligns Vikram Seth's travelogue with Kwame Anthony Appiah's conceptualisation of cosmopolitanism as "universalism plus difference" to situate Seth's work as a quintessential cosmopolitan text. One of Seth's earliest texts, *From Heaven Lake*, is an evocative account of 1970s China, particularly through the politically fraught region of Sinkiang and Tibet. Seth, the foreign traveller, successfully undertakes this unique journey solely due to the cosmopolitan worldview of the people he meets along the way. The narrative contrasts the restrictive and repressive Chinese government apparatus with the easy, helpful nature of the ordinary men and women he meets along the way. This is an important text in his oeuvre and may be read as a primer to the cosmopolitan aesthetics which defines his later texts*

**Keywords**

*Cosmopolitanism, Travelogue, Cultural Identity, Marginalization, Humanism, etc.*

**Full Article**

China in the 1970s wasn't very different from today. Travel was heavily regulated for foreigners, especially in the minority regions of Sinkiang and Tibet. In this surveillance state comprising a multiethnic and multilingual population, it is the classic song *Awaara Hoon* from the 1951 Hindi movie *Awaara* starring Raj Kapoor and Nargis that helps Vikram Seth forge connections and break barriers, enabling him to undertake a journey through the remote regions of North-Western and Western China en route to Delhi. *From Heaven Lake* is an account of this remarkable journey. This paper aims to situate Vikram Seth, the traveller-writer's work, *From Heaven Lake*, as a cosmopolitan text. I shall employ the philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah's formulation of cosmopolitanism in his path-breaking work titled *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*. In his conceptualisation of cosmopolitanism, Kwame Anthony Appiah has no illusions or desire for a homogeneous world order. Cosmopolitanism is, as he puts it, "universalism plus difference" (Appiah, 151). Even though our primary identities are shaped by religion, ethnicity, and nationality, cosmopolitanism is an awareness of the fundamental universality of our human existence. The earlier narrow view that cosmopolitanism is an abstraction with minimal relevance today and that cosmopolitans are the elite who jet-set across cities of the world has been challenged by many scholars like Kwame Appiah, Ulrich Beck, Martha Nussbaum and others. Commenting on the present reality, Appiah succinctly states, "Cosmopolitanism isn't hard work; repudiating it is" (Appiah, xviii). Ulrich Beck, in *Cosmopolitan Vision*, too, opines that it is pointless arguing whether patriotism is practical and cosmopolitanism idealistic because the human condition, in all its aspects: social, political, and economic, has become cosmopolitan (Beck, 1-2). Today, in this era of hyper-nationalism, the world seems to have forgotten the trauma of the two world wars. In the latter half of the twentieth century, the realisation that a politics guided solely by national or sectarian interests will eventually lead to the decimation of the human



race led to a renewed interest in the ancient Greek philosophy of cosmopolitanism among contemporary scholars.

That literature makes conversations among strangers possible is axiomatic. I use the word “conversations” in this research, as conceptualised by Kwame Anthony Appiah in *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in the World of Strangers*, as an “imaginative engagement” when one reads literature, watches films and experiences art “from someplace other than your own” (Appiah, 85). Literature has always played a critical role in facilitating empathy and awareness, and literature shapes and is, in turn, shaped by society at large. A cosmopolitan world order is only possible if the nations, communities, and individuals that comprise it are cosmopolitan. Reflecting on the nature and power of art, the philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah posits that literature helps to disclose new values or challenge our adherence to existing values. Using this common language of values will help us build bridges based on commonalities so that we either agree or can agree to disagree (Appiah, 30). Travel writing of the kind that Vikram Seth writes, therefore, remains a critical tool in fostering a cosmopolitan ethos in the present world, driven by hyper-nationalism.

Vikram Seth was born and raised in India, graduated from Oxford University and then went to Stanford to pursue a PhD in Economics, which took him to Nanjing University, China, for his field study. As a graduate student in economics at Stanford University, he was the Wallace Stegner Fellow in Creative Writing (1977-78) (Prasad, 14). In 1980, the Writer’s Workshop, Calcutta, published Seth’s first poetry collection, *Mappings*. Perhaps because he was a kind of literary untouchable,” because he composed poems in rhyme and metre, this book did not receive much critical attention (Seth, xvi). In 1983, he published a travelogue titled *From Heaven Lake: Travels in Sinkiang and Tibet*, which garnered him widespread acclaim, and he received the Thomas Cook Travel Book Award. His time in China also inspired the publication of *The Humble Administrator’s Garden* in 1985. *The Golden Gate: A Novel in Verse*, Seth’s first fictional work, was released in 1986 and earned him the Sahitya Academy Award and the Asian Commonwealth Poetry Prize in 1988. Seth began his magnum opus, *The Suitable Boy*, which was published in 1993. In between, he published *All You Who Sleep Tonight* in 1990 and *Beastly Tales From Here and There*, a short collection of verse fables. The 1992 publication *Three Chinese Poets* is a collection of translations of poems by Du Fu, Wang Wei, and Li Bai. The English National Opera’s Baylis Program commissioned him in 1994 to compose the text for *Arion and the Dolphin*. In 1999, Seth returned to fiction with the publication of *An Equal Music*, a novel about a group of British classical musicians. With the publication of *Two Lives*, a story of his German-Jewish aunt Henny and uncle Shanti that focuses on the politically charged period preceding and during the Second World War, he moved from writing fiction to biography. In 2015, he published *Summer Requiem*, a collection of poems.

Regardless of the different genres, all his writings are bound by a deep sense of our connected humanity. There is an episode in *From Heaven Lake*, when Seth has to cross the Tibet-Nepal border on foot and is unaware that he has actually crossed an international boundary. There, he sees a Nepali woman washing clothes near the river, which is a natural boundary between China and Nepal. He writes, “A woman wearing a sari is washing clothes in a small stream.... Her soap lies on one rock, her washing on another. She couldn’t care less which country she is in” (Seth, 169-70). These lines describe the deceptiveness of borders between nation-states, in this case, between China and Nepal. It strikes him that the woman is blissfully unconcerned about the soap or her clothes resting on a Chinese or Nepalese rock. Seth will spend a career exploring the absurdity of manmade borders and walls where none naturally exist via much of his poetry and prose.



*From Heaven Lake* begins with Seth feeling shackled under the constraints of travelling as a tourist. He is on a three-week tour arranged for foreign students of Nanjing University, and the regulated and formulaic nature of the entire journey irks him. Travelling through hot Turfan, he notes its long history as well as the present persecution of Uighur Muslims by the majority Han-dominated Communist China. The overarching principle of the Communist government is to strengthen its power over an ancient multiethnic multireligious civilisation through the politics of homogenisation: buildings, languages, cultures, and lifestyles must all conform to the dictates of the CPC. More than fifty minority ethnic groups exist in China. The government has attempted to homogenise them with the Han majority by either skewing the native population through Han migration from the east to the west or through village adoption programmes where Han instructors are dispatched to the villages. The author observes that the Han population in Lhasa is already greater than the native Tibetan population. In addition to being ethically reprehensible, Seth views conformity and uniformity as aesthetically repellent. The brilliant hues of Uighur clothing of the Sinkiang region are contrasted with the homogeneous drab blue attire of Eastern China (Appiah, 3). Seth also documents Communist China's aesthetic sanitisation with its mind-numbing uniform architecture of "cuboids" with no natural variation necessitated by geography (Appiah, 37). He observes that this homogeneity extends beyond architecture and may be seen in various (revised) facets of Chinese culture, rendering it "a paradigm of ... unloveliness" (Appiah, 38). The "wretched institution" of "exercise music" that is blasted through loudspeakers...aborts the air of peace" and jolts the Chinese out of their thoughts and sleep is another nightmare of Chinese uniformity (Appiah, 71).

That Seth is a traveller and not a curious tourist is established at the very beginning of the narrative. He seeks connections and insights into the lives of the people he meets, rather than a long list of tourist spots on the itinerary. During this trip that has been organised for foreign travellers, he notes with frustration, "The first is inherent in any group activity- a discipline, a punctuality imposed upon the participants...to be hustled by the Group Will into rushing from sight to sight, savouring nothing, is, I'm sure, irksome to all of us" (Seth, 6). While travelling itself has been easy, as all the necessary documentation and bureaucratic red tape have been handled by the organisers, Seth feels smothered. Only chance meetings with locals can break up this monotony (frowned upon by officialdom, so that local behaviour is not corrupted by foreign influence). Thus, despite being escorted from place to place, the author is frequently compelled to interact with the locals, who are also excited to see unfamiliar faces. He often gets by singing songs from Raj Kapoor's movie *Awara*, which is popular in China and often "comes as a shock (to me) sometimes to hear it hummed on the streets in Nanjing" (Seth, 11). The writer realises that his habitual absent-minded dawdling causes inconvenience to others, "You are late as usual" (Seth, 5) comments the amiable guide, and guided by his desire to travel freely, he embarks upon a remarkably challenging journey from Nanjing to Delhi via Sinkiang and Tibet in 1970s China. Relying solely on luck and the kindness of strangers, he hopes to negotiate through the notorious labyrinth of *lianxi* (connection/relation), *guanxi* (social network in official places), regulations, and all the attendant paperwork in a heavily regulated China where every foreigner's movement is being heavily monitored. Back in Nanjing from the conducted tour, he prepares for the trip ahead. He characteristically reflects that coming to Nanjing feels like a homecoming (Seth, 32). He continues to ponder:

Increasingly of late, and particularly when I drink, I find my thoughts drawn into the past rather than impelled into the future. I recall drinking sherry in California and dreaming of my earlier student days in England, where I ate dalmoth and dreamed of Delhi. What is the



purpose, I wonder, of all this restlessness? I sometimes seem to myself to wander around the world merely accumulating material for future nostalgias (Seth, 35).

As he prepares for his road trip back to India, he becomes aware that he is walking in the footsteps of ancient merchants and scholar-travellers. In a Turfan museum, he finds a map depicting Fa Xian's journey to India in the fifth century and Xuan Zang's journey to India a few centuries later. For foreigners, travel within China is restricted, and proper documentation is required to pass any international border. He doesn't seem concerned, however. He views this bureaucratic travel restriction as a part of the Chinese system. He relates Fa Xian's perspective that travelling freely throughout India contrasts with the administrative burdens in his country (Seth, 17). He avoids passing judgment on China's stringent rules for outsiders travelling there. Instead, he notes that the Cultural Revolution's xenophobia has largely faded and that the average Chinese person views foreigners as a source of curiosity. He recounts heart-warming and humorous anecdotes of men and women he meets along the way, jubilations and tribulations that any travel entails, all narrated against the backdrop of breathtaking scenery. Seth's ability to appreciate the diversity of cultures without eroticising, exonerating, or evaluating them enables him to find pleasure even in ordinary interactions and experiences. As readers, we are provided with a sensitive and exhaustive account of China and Tibet. For him, human relationships are always more significant and memorable than objects and places, which will ultimately shape the world.

This travelogue subverts the idea that travelling is about being visually stimulated by difference; instead, it describes the emotional richness the author experiences due to the unexpected kindness of strangers, random hostility, bureaucratic obduracy and absurdity, and strangers who trawl through their memories for something "Indian" to connect with the author. The range of experiences, both pleasant and unpleasant, is described with warmth and humour. What one remembers after reading the travelogue, in addition to the culture and scenery of China and Tibet, are the intriguing characters, such as the Uighur tailor who refuses to accept payment for the cap Seth buys and instead tears it apart to re-stitch and strengthen it so that it will last the duration of the journey. Seth is touched by the old tailor's generosity and wishes him 'salaam aleikum', a phrase Seth knows the tailor will understand (Seth, 28). Verbal language is often shown as inessential to communicating with the world and that warmth and humanity can be expressed through nonverbal ways. Even Chinese officials who check his paperwork frequently inquire whether he has "established a home" (married), behaving more like the author's Indian relatives than official representatives of a foreign government. Then there is Sui, the Han truck driver, who gives Seth a lift in his Liberation truck. This warm and eccentric fellow is given to making numerous stops on the way as he visits friends and families carrying gifts of fruits, flowers, or anything else he fancies. The Chinese, Uighurs, and Tibetans the author meets are presented as individuals rather than as foreigners. All agree that the 1962 Indo-China conflict was the government's fault rather than the people's (Seth, 40). The people he meets are more interested in the family photo that the writer carries with him; he has to answer their queries about his mother's bindi, his father's kurta, his sister's cut-off jeans, his future job, and other sundry personal details.

Travellers have been narrating their experiences for millennia, and travel writing is a vibrant genre. The appropriate framework for travel writing became critical as post-colonial theory challenged Western accounts of the "Orient." Every travel brochure claims to provide travellers with an "authentic experience", but is such an experience even authentic? There can be no one answer about the best way to travel and write about travels. Seth, on his part, experiences events as it occurs rather than forging ahead with a travel plan in mind. This un-conducted tour makes



every experience more intense: the sight of an old rambling monastery, a beautiful sunset, the vast expanse of the cold desert, a delicious home-cooked meal, vomit-inducing food, a picnic with a Tibetan family, the majestic Potala, unexpected kindness shown by Uighurs, Hans, and Tibetans. His willingness to explore the uncharted offers a distinctive way to travel. In comparison, Guy Delisle's *Shenzhen-A Travelogue from China* (2000), published seventeen years later, cannot negotiate with a different culture even when he is writing in a globalised world. Seth is respectful of those aspects of culture that he does not comprehend or may find unpalatable.

During this journey, one of Seth's most profound experiences involves a Tibetan death ceremony that the author watches close to the Sera monastery. His manner speaks volumes about his sensitive nature. In Lhasa, he goes near the Sera monastery to witness a typical death ceremony. To avoid offending those in charge, he maintains a respectful distance. It is the break of dawn, and he can see the silhouettes of the eagles waiting patiently as the men go about their tasks. When the sun rises, he sees that the rock is strewn with human corpses, which the men then hack and cut up; the skulls are covered with cloths and smashed with a large stone. This human mince is then mixed with *tsampa* and fed to the birds of prey. During the ritual, a group of Chinese come and started laughing loudly. Some Chinese soldiers also come bearing a telescope to view the "spectacle" without attempting to be discreet during this solemn occasion. One often tends to mock things that are beyond one's comprehension. While this can be limited to innocuous behaviour like simply pointing and laughing like the Chinese "spectators", it is also the seed of xenophobia. The Chinese reaction comes from the awareness of the asymmetrical relation that exists between the occupying ethno-political majority and the occupied. While walking back to Lhasa, Seth contemplates the different death rites across religions. This moving account of his innate compassion and understanding elevate this narrative from a simple travelogue into a treatise of cosmopolitan sensibility. Ashe comes without preconceived notions and expectations; he can flow with the rhythm of the travel and become a Taoist. His account is neither that of a tourist nor an ethnographer, and we sense neither wonderment nor chastisement of the unfamiliar. And all along, he remains invested in the minor but meaningful aspects of life and culture, as he writes:

As I listen to the sounds outside, it strikes me that although I know a certain amount about the language, literature and history of China, I am appallingly ignorant about the songs, the lullabies, the nursery rhymes, the street games of the children, the riddles; all the things that are most important in the childhood of Chinese people. Chinese language courses do not include this; indeed, how could they be expected to? Yet without such things, one cannot understand the wealth of references made to a common past, the causal assumption of shared experiences that lie behind conversation in any language. It is like knowing *Macbeth* without knowing 'Three Blind Mice' or the Ramayana without 'Chanda Mama' (Seth, 84-85).

The travelogue also contains philosophical passages that testify to his inherent cosmopolitan nature. Travelling by road, across international boundaries, he becomes acutely aware of the elemental unities that bind humans, for the air and the water do not belong to one nation only. In a particularly enlightening passage, he contemplates the fundamental unity of human beings.

Snow and ice lie packed, perhaps for years, on the crests and cwms, in glaciers, in the permanent snows, suddenly crack and thaw and churn into the snowmelt. The water, deeper than the highest peaks are high, lies in the sea until welled to the surface and accepted into the air as



vapour. The moist air circles the world to fall again into the sea as snow or rain, or as snow or rain on the land (Seth, 165).

Back home in Delhi, he recites names like Turfan, Urumqi, Liuyuan, Nilamu, Shigatse, and Lhasa, to reassure himself that this incredible journey indeed took place. These names are associated with stronger memories of the friends he has made along the way, like Sui, Norbu, and Quzha (Seth, 177). Despite being geographically contiguous, India and China have a fraught political history. He observes that whereas South Asia has seen a convergence of civilisations, Tibet, India, and China have remained aloof from one another. Seth concludes his narrative on a hopeful note, urging for “respectful patience” at the national level and a greater level of engagement at the personal level because “to learn about another great culture is to enrich one’s life, to understand one’s own country better, to feel more at home in the world, and indirectly to add to that reservoir of individual goodwill that may, generations from now, temper the cynical use of national power” (Seth, 178). It is noteworthy that the kindness shown to the ordinary people he encounters along the road does not extend to the repressive government policies in China his position on the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) that occurred under Mao Zedong and the infamous 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre of young protestors by the Chinese army. Passing through Sinkiang and Tibet, he is also acutely aware of the homogenising politics of CPC based on coercive measures adopted to “manage” the minority Muslim and Tibetan communities.

With his humanism firmly in place, Seth carefully distinguishes between the ordinary Han Chinese and the CPC. He records the psychological trauma of homogenising tendencies through his interactions with the common Uighur and the Tibetan people. He meets Muslims in Xian who tell him stories of their suffering under Mao. One Uighur man, for instance, claims that in addition to mosques being shut down and imams being imprisoned, literally “the whole flavour of (our) existence altered” as the practice of halal came to be considered a “vestige of feudal mentality,” resulting in Muslims abstaining from meat consumption (Seth, 31). The man hesitates when Seth asks whether things have improved over time and answers, “Yes, better. But once something like that has happened...” (Seth, 31). Although the Han ethnic group dominates China, Seth observes that six per cent of its minorities inhabit sixty per cent of its areas (Seth, 3).

Seth highlights the pervasive bigotry towards racial minorities as he observes Han nationalism closely in Tibet. While he acknowledges that Hans must lead a difficult life, “This does not go far enough to explain why Hans despises the culture of Tibetans and other minorities. The attitude is not confined to those who have only received a primary education: many of my Chinese acquaintances, and, alas, some of my friends also share it” (Seth, 107). Seth meets Norbu, a Tibetan youth, while strolling through Lhasa and learns about the atrocities committed during the Chinese occupation of Tibet. After mock trials, their family members, loved ones, and friends were executed or imprisoned, leaving the survivors with years of destitution and psychological trauma. The Cultural Revolution’s history illustrates the disastrous results of attempts to homogenise the world. While cosmopolitanism does call for the universalisation of some core values, any such vision should be accompanied by ongoing revisions to prevent it from becoming a dogma or an uncosmopolitan ideology.

Seth condemns the Tiananmen Square Massacre in the “Foreword” to the 1990 edition of the text. The restraint he had displayed in the travelogue’s 1983 edition gives way to visceral wrath. On 4 May 1989, students assembled at Tiananmen Square to demand freedom of speech. The People’s Liberation Army brutally crushed this peaceful protest by firing at the students and killing hundreds of demonstrators. Seth composed a moving verse on this occasion, which he later added to the “Foreword” in *From Heaven Lake*:



No miracle will ever clean  
The memory, bestial and obscene,  
Of those who, having fouled their trust,  
Grew warped with dread and power lust-  
And ordered fire on the square,  
On unarmed people everywhere,  
Brave people seeking to be free  
Of rottenness, of tyranny.

In “Vikram Seth’s Journey through Mainland China”, Nandini Chandra compares Seth’s cosmopolitan travelogue to the orientalist account of Western travellers (Prasad, 22). Whether at home in India or travelling abroad, he always seeks correspondence through music, landscape, and human behaviour. In Kathmandu, when he hears a flute seller playing a bansuri, he is riveted to the sound and muses on the universal sound of flute music (Seth, 176). The travelogue can be read as an expression of his cosmopolitan philosophy, wherein he suggests the importance of nurturing the ability to form and transform, and exist and co-exist, as a counterpoint to the norm of identity formation based on rigid political, cultural, and social boundaries. *From Heaven Lake* is therefore an account of the stories of marginal people, including truck drivers, low-ranking government officials, and Tibetan dissidents, people who exhibit cosmopolitanism in their capacity to expand their imaginations to the fullest and extend their hospitality to friends and strangers in times of need. That is the reason why China, for him remains memories of people he met rather than just a geographical entity. He observes, “One’s attitude towards a place is only partly determined by the greatness of its history...When I think of China, I think first of my friends and only then of Qin Shi Huantomb” (Seth, 36). At the end of the journey, Seth’s cosmopolitan aesthetic, which he continues to explore in his later works, becomes more pronounced.

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