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## Vikram Seth's *From Heaven Lake* as a Counter-Orientalist Travel Narrative

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### Abstract

This study reads Vikram Seth's *From Heaven Lake: Travels through Sinkiang and Tibet* (1983) as a counter-orientalist travel narrative that destabilizes the conventions of Western travel writing genre. Conventional Western travel writing, as postcolonial scholars such as Edward Said, Homi K. Bhabha and others claim, functioned mostly as a colonial or orientalist discourse by being involved in producing knowledge about the Orient for Western domination and control. It created a binary between the West and the Orient and treated the latter in negative and derogatory terms. The residues of colonial discourse, as critics such as Debbie Lisle, Mary Louise Pratt and others argue, persist in the postcolonial travel writing as well. This paper examines Seth's travelogue and claims that the travelogue counters the orientalist discourse primarily in two ways. One, it renders differences upon the peoples and their cultures in positive terms, and another, it avoids the conventional home-away-home trajectory of journey. For the analytic purpose, the study engages both available critical responses and theoretical insights from scholars in travel writing and postcolonial theories such as Carl Thompson, Debbie Lisle, Tim Youngs, Edward Said and so on. Finally, the study expects to open up a new approach in the study of post-empire travel narratives, especially written by non-Western writers.

**Keywords:** Colonial/orientalist discourse, travel writing, home, West, Orient

### Introduction

This paper interprets Vikram Seth's *From Heaven Lake: Travels through Sinkiang and Tibet* (*From Heaven Lake* hereafter) as a counter-orientalist travel narrative arguing that the narrative counters the Western travel writing's conventional style of representing the Orient in derogatory and negative ways as well as its home-away-home journey paradigm. Conventionally, a traveler would mostly represent the foreign peoples and their cultures in condescending ways, but Seth represents them in positive ways.

Likewise, conventionally, a traveler's journey would begin from home for away and end at home again but Seth's journey begins from away and ends at home. To analyze the text, the study borrows insights from the scholars in travel writing and postcolonial studies such as Carl Thompson, Debbie Lisle, Patrick Holland, Graham Huggan, Edward Said, Rune Graulund and so on. Reading the text through this perspective, the study attempts to add a new approach in the study of post-empire travel narratives especially written by non-Western writers.

Seth's book recounts his journey from Sinkiang of China to India through Tibet and Nepal. While doing his PhD study at Stanford University, he received an opportunity to study at Nanjing University as an exchange student for two years from 1980 to 1982. During the summer vacation in 1981, he made a plan to visit his family in India traveling through Tibet. It was not an easy decision though since he did not prefer the fast and comfortable air-travel. Air-travel would spare him more time to spend with the family, and also, it would take less physical exertion. He wished to enjoy different places, people and their cultures on the way. So, notwithstanding the unavailability of the means of transportation and natural discomforts, he planned to hitch-hike as and when possible, and even walk at other times, across various parts of China and Nepal. He wished to enjoy sightseeing natural and historical sites and meeting especially the ordinary Chinese people. With this in mind, he began his journey from Nanjing University. His travelogue details the observations and experiences during his journey across four provinces of China: Sinkiang, Gansu, Qinghai and Tibet, as well as of the capital city of Nepal, Kathmandu. It received the Thomas Cook Travel Book Award in 1983 though it did not get any American publisher until 1986.

### Literature Review

Various scholars have offered their critical views on Seth's *From Heaven Lake*. Rohini Mokashi-Punekar reads it as a leisurely account with the descriptions of the natural landscapes and warm friendship that Seth develops with the ordinary Chinese people. Mokashi-Punekar notes, "Seth journeyed through places off the usual tourist routes and that he sympathetically portrays a large variety of working-class Chinese and Tibetan people" (58). Ashima Sona views Seth as a writer who has attempted to assimilate cultural differences "with a deep understanding of humanity and culture" (1). Rajula Albert identifies Seth as a writer of multiple identities for his involvement in the production of works in different genres as well as acceptance of the place, wherever he goes, as his home. Albert states, "He is a poet, a novelist, a travel writer and the author of a libretto. Unlike most Indian writers of Indian origin . . . Seth seems to home everywhere in the world" (625). Nandini Chandra takes Seth as a cosmopolitan writer that denies to be rooted nor exiled, instead he seeks to bring forth "the marginal histories and suppressed voices" from anywhere (22). Roopali Gupta reads the book as an inspirational text for enhancing his confidence as a writer. According to her, "[It] was greatly responsible for giving Seth the confidence to think himself as a writer" (4). Sam Knowles has the similar view with Gupta. Knowles considers the book as a foundational text for building Seth's writing career both as a fiction and travel writer. He states, "[It is] a significant foundation of Vikram Seth's fictional work . . . [that] led to the multiple successes of Seth's later writing career as a traveller and writer" (57). Barbara Korte understands Seth as a traveler of the age of global village with "a globalized perspective," who enjoys food and drink that are "symbols of a world turned multi-or transnational" (168-69).

In addition to the above critics, Tim Youngs acknowledges Seth's "declaration of identity and the information of his itinerary" (116). According to Youngs, Seth travels

with his Indian identity by providing information about his itinerary that has no reference to the West. But, Youngs also comments that Seth fails to free himself from the “socio-economic” structure which he seeks to reject because Seth expresses “his indebtedness to US institutions (116). Seth has received scholarship from the American university to study in China. Similarly, Patrick Holland and Graham Huggan deem *From Heaven Lake* as a “counter-orientalist” travel narrative in the sense that it challenges “ethnocentric Western views of a mythicized East” (60). Agreeing with Edward Said’s idea of the Orient or East as an ‘imaginative geography,’ Holland and Huggan consider the East as “a mythicized construct” of the West (60). Holland and Huggan believe that conventional travel narratives mostly view the East from the Western perspective, but, Seth’s narrative does not do so. Instead, it views it through a local perspective.

The above reviews on the book indicate that it has received critical responses of scholars from different angles. But, though Youngs, Holland and Huggan have mentioned Seth’s avoidance of the Western reference both in itinerary and perspective, in-depth analysis about how it counters the orientalist discourse has remained under-researched yet. So, borrowing Holland and Huggan’s ‘counter-orientalist’ paradigm for the title, this study explores adequate evidences from the text and justifies how it embodies counter-orientalist ethos.

### **Travel Writing and Orientalist Discourse**

Travel writing has historically come down a long way. Its origins, as Tim Youngs traces, “go back thousands of years” (19). Since the antiquity, human beings have travelled for various purposes and narrated their experiences to others. Travels and their narrations have ever remained interesting phenomena. Travel, as Tabish Khair claims, has been influential in initiating “the beginning of all major religions” (1). Almost all the peoples of the world have their own travel histories whether written or oral. But until recently, non-European travel histories, and even written in other languages than English, have been either “ignored” (Korte 152) or “erased” (Khair 5). The reason behind it is, as Clair Lindsay argues, the privileges of “mobility and representation which stem directly from Empire and which continue to be associated predominantly with the West” (31). Colonial expansion helped travel writers make their journey to wider destinations whereas such writers produced knowledge about foreign territories and simultaneously contributed in colonial expansion. Due to colonial expansion as well as access to mobility and print, Western travel writing written in English has remained widely dominant. Based on the fact of its linkage with colonialism, postcolonial thinkers, especially, in the wake of Edward Said’s groundbreaking book, *Orientalism* (1978), have taken travel writing as a colonial or orientalist discourse.

Said’s book drew critical attention to the study of the Western travel texts written about the Orient during the colonial era. He dubs these texts as orientalist discourse for he finds them upholding the age-long European imagination about the Orient as the ‘other’ of Europe. He proclaims that travel texts operate in the production of imaginary Orient “for dominating, structuring, and having an authority. . . politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively” (3). In this sense, Western travel narratives as discourses implicate power for gathering knowledge about the Orient and subsequently having a control over it. After Said, other critics have also depicted the contribution of travel writing in colonial project. For example, Homi K. Bhabha argues that the orientalist discourses project the non-Western peoples as “degenerated types” (101). Kim M. Philips states that these discourses present the other i.e. the non-West, in a minimized and demonized way “to claim superiority for colonizer and justify acts of conquest and dominion” (58). John McLeod regards them “as

fundamental weapons of colonial power to keep colonized peoples subservient to colonial rule" (17). Besides these scholars, there are many others who claim that the Western travel narratives produced cultural otherness that played a discursive role in the making and perpetuation of European imperialism.

Contrarily, scholars have different views about the post-empire travel narratives. Post-empire travel narratives are produced by not only the White authors but also by the non-White ones. Scholars have debates on whether travel narratives continue working as colonial discourse or mark a departure. Scholars such as Lisle, Mary Louise Pratt and Carl Thompson see the continuation of colonial conventions in this or that form. For example, Debbie Lisle argues that travel writers of whatever background judge differences according to the preconceived values. She notes, "The travel writer—no matter what his/her background or ethnicity—identifies difference, places it in a value-laden hierarchy, and judges accordingly" (115). Pratt avers that travel books by the Europeans continue creating the domestic subjects. She puts her opinion as: "travel books by Europeans about non-European parts of the world went (and go) about creating the 'domestic subject' of Euroimperialism" (4). Similarly, Thompson points out the continuation of othering trope in travel writing employs to show how one culture is "not only different but also inferior" to another culture (134). On the other hand, scholars such as Edwards, Rune Graulund, Julia Kuehn, Paul Smethurst, Barbara Korte and Robert Clark see the travel writers' efforts to depart from colonial conventions. For example, Justin D. Edwards and Rune Graulund argue that postcolonial travel texts articulate hitherto subdued experiences ontologies. They note, "[P]ostcolonial travel texts resist the gravitational pull of metropolitan centrality and cosmopolitanism by articulating experiences and ontologies that are often removed from dominant European or North American productions of knowledge" (2). Kuehn and Smethurst maintain that travel writing has been responsive to the changed contexts. They view, since the late 1980s, "[T]ravel writing proved especially adaptable and responsive to the application of cross-cultural, post-colonial, gender and globalization studies" (1). Korte argues, the postcolonial travel writers "have certainly added a range of other sensitivities, perspectives and attitudes" though they have "not subverted the traditional generic patterns" (178). Similarly, Clarke claims that the postcolonial travelers "have used their accounts as vehicles to critique the persistent of colonialism and imperialism" (1). These critical ideas hint at the ongoing debate on the contemporary travel writing's role in continuing orientalist discourse or departing from it.

On the whole, amidst the debates, this study selects *From Heaven Lake* by Seth, a writer from non-Western background, and analyzes how it counters the colonial conventions since in-depth analysis has remained undone yet. For the analytical purpose, it uses colonial discourse (and associated terms such as othering) as a theoretical tool. In addition, it comes up with a claim that the book marks a departure from orientalist perspective.

### ***From Heaven Lake* as a Counter-Orientalist Travel Narrative**

While situating travel writing into a genre, Debbie Lisle in her book, *The Global Politics of Contemporary Travel Writing*, has listed its general poetics as: travelogues are about journey; travelogues are stories; travelogues are classified as non-fiction; travelogues use fictional means to interpret facts; and travelogues are primarily about difference (36-40). As Lisle enlists, travel writing engages stories about an actual journey of a traveler, who leaves home in quest of certain things and comes back home. A journey, as Lisle depicts, has a narrative structure of "beginning—middle—end [which] is inseparable from home—away—home" paradigm (37). The criterion of actual

journey of a traveler qualifies travel writing as a non-fiction. But travel writing often employs a fictional technique such as a narrative so as to translate the facts into a readable stuff. Further, it entertains a difference, whether positive or negative, between the traveling 'self' and the travellee 'other.' Seth's work meets all these criteria and hence occupies space in the corpus of travel writing genre.

The book details the actual journey of Seth that begins at Nanjing University in China and ends at his parents' home in Delhi through northwest China, Tibet and Nepal. It consists of "the first-person narrative of travel" which is required to claim "to be a true record of the author's own experiences" (Thompson 27). Seth himself claims the actuality of the travel in the book as: "This book is an account of what I saw, thought and felt as I travelled through various parts of the People's Republic of China as a student" (2). Seth has framed the book into such a narrative that it meets the standard of a fiction book. Additionally, the book is significant in building and enriching "confidence" in him "as a writer" (Gupta 4) and setting "a significant foundation . . . [for his] later writing career as a traveller and writer" (Knowles 57). Further, the book also fulfills the criterion of travel writing by producing difference between himself as an Indian and the Chinese. But it differs from conventional travel writing primarily in two ways. One, it debunks the conventional home-away-home paradigm, and another, it avoids projecting negative differences condescendingly upon the travellee others.

Conventionally, a travelogue contained a narrative structure of beginning, middle and end which coincided with a home-away-home paradigm. For a colonial traveler, home was inevitably the West from where he would begin his journey for abroad in search of a specific object and finally come back home. This would promote, as Rune Graulund argues, "Eurocentric manner of ensuring difference . . . providing the traveling European subject with a strong sense of Self" (118). The traveling subjects, as postcolonial thinkers argue, would frame the notion of European self as superior to the non-Western self by way of producing difference based on binary opposition. All this was done, as Said stresses, with the intention of "dominating, structuring, and having an authority over the Orient" (3). Thus, in colonial travel writing, 'home' was intentionally prioritized to 'away.' The imperialist legacy of regarding the West as the home of travel continues even in the post-empire travel writers both of the white and non-white origins. Many non-Western travel writers such as VS Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, Pico Iyer, Caryl Phillips, Bharati Mukherjee and many others who are located in the Western metropolises make their departure point as well as the return point in the West.

But Seth's work bypasses the West as the home of the traveling subject completely. His journey neither begins in the West nor ends there. Instead, it begins and ends both in the oriental spaces—begins at Nanjing University in China and ends at Delhi in India. This travelogue, as Carl Thompson states, recounts an alternative itinerary that does not "begin and end in the West, as has been so often the case in the genre" (211). More unconventionally, Seth's journey begins at abroad and ends at home. In this sense, Seth debunks the home-away-home paradigm of travel writing.

Similarly, unlike colonial travel writing, Seth's book neither prioritizes the West, produces knowledge for its benefit, constructs a binary opposition between itself and the non-West, nor shows any temptation of having authority over the traveled destination. Instead, like Amitav Ghosh's *The Antique Land*, Seth's travelogue maps "connections and cultural exchanges between different regions of the developing world and . . . [yields] rich and complex histories which have been neglected (or deliberately ignored) in the West" (Thompson 211). Ghosh revisits the history of interconnectedness of two oriental nations, India and Egypt, during the twelfth century. In fact, as Thompson has noted, Seth presents the geographical and cultural connectedness between the two Asian

nations, and their histories which have hitherto remained unknown to the West. Departing from the othering trends of orientalist discourse, Seth brings a real life of the Orient without conjuring up false images and furnishing them with false details. He extends reverence to the local cultures and religions, gives voice to the suppressed people, keeps amiable relationship with the people he encounters, and even urges the two nations to build amicable ties.

Seth's travelogue begins with the description of his journey from Nanjing University to the Chinese desert regions of Turfan, Heaven Lake, Mount Bogda and Xian. This journey is organized for foreign students by Nanjing University where Seth is doing research work as an exchange student from Stanford University, California. Despite being a beneficiary with the research scholarship from the Western university, the author refers to the West very rarely. He simply recalls past memories of ordinary events such as of having alcohol and *dalmoth*: "I recall drinking sherry in California and dreaming of my earlier student days in England, where I ate *dalmoth* and dreamed of Delhi" (43). Seth's priority is not the West, but the non-West.

Seth exhibits respect to the Chinese culture and religion. While at Nanjing University, sometimes, he wears "Chinese clothes" (42). In Lhasa, he visits the Buddhist temples like Jokhang and Potala. He describes the Tibetan ritual of chopping the dead body and offering it to the eagles. But he does not judge it as a barbarian act in the way the Western travelers would normally do. He simply compares it with the rituals of other traditions: "Christians and Muslims bury their dead body, in effect feeding them to the worms. The Parsis feed their dead to the vultures in their Towers of Silence. But they leave the bodies whole. Here in Tibet where wood is scarce and the ground hard for much of the year, the body is chopped up, mixed up with meal, and fed to the eagles" (184). Seth supports this ritual of chopping a dead body with reasons. He speaks of cultural difference on a positive note taking it as a lesson "to enrich one's life, to understand one's own country better, to feel more at home in the world . . . [and to] temper the cynical use of national power" (221). In this sense, as Sona has put, Seth has "a deep understanding of humanity and culture" (1). This marks his counter-orientalist approach.

In his travelogue, Seth allows the suppressed voice to speak freely. He describes the consequences of the Cultural Revolution in Tibet in this way: "On the hillside behind the temples are ruins of wood and clay. These reminders of the fury of cultural intolerance are so far beyond repair as to discourage even the thoughts of it" (170). Further, Norbu, the local resident of Lhasa, tells Seth more about the suppression of the Han Chinese upon the Tibetans during the Cultural Revolution as: "My father spent thirteen years in prison and I spent twelve, because of them. . . . Our lives were ruined, mine and my father's—and my mother . . ." (176). But Norbu also informs him about the change that has taken place in the present as: "It's different now, we can talk to you freely, you can come to our house, we aren't afraid. But a few years ago . . . we couldn't dare to speak" (178-79). Seth brings forth, as Chandra has referred, "the marginal histories and suppressed voices" especially of the Tibetan people (22). In this respect, unlike most of the orientalists, who would pass their judgements on other people's histories, Seth does not involve in such judgements. Instead, he lets others speak themselves.

From the very beginning of his journey, Seth tries to develop a symmetric and amicable relationship with the people he encounters. He comes across different kinds of people like Hans, Uighurs, Kazakhs, Muslims, Buddhists and Christians, and attempts to exchange a cordial friendship with them. He finds them too having curiosity towards the foreigners in return: "As for the Chinese people, there is a general sense of friendliness

and curiosity towards the individual foreigner" (11). Seth tries to bring forth the behavioral propensity of the ordinary Chinese people towards the foreigners. He mentions various events when he himself has received friendly responses from the Chinese like Sui, Gyanseng, Xiao San, Norbu, cap seller, security officials. Sui not only allows him a lift in his truck but also takes "an excellent care" of him all through the truck journey (100). Gyanseng and San make a good accompaniment in the truck. Norbu informs him about the political situation of Tibet. The Muslim cap seller makes him a comfortable cap after hearing him speak Urdu. In addition, the security officials, though strictly abiding to the phrase, "regulations are regulations," allow him a pass to go to Tibet which was forbidden for foreigners outside official reasons (65). The officials endorse the permission after hearing him sing a song from the Indian movie, *Awara*, which has been a hit there. Besides, Seth also mentions of receiving a good support and warmth from the Nepali ambassador, Mr., Shah, in Lhasa. All this discloses the fact that Seth establishes an amicable relationship between the peoples of the three oriental nations at individual level.

Interestingly, Seth expresses a wish of amicable relationship between India and China at national level as well. He is disappointed by the border disputes and lack of strong economic interest and natural affinities of a common culture between the two neighbors. So, he advocates for strong ties, that he expects to bring peace in the world: "If India and China were amicable towards each other, almost half the world would be at peace" (220). For this, he suggests the need of the solution of border dispute: "The best that can be hoped for on a national level is a respectful patience on either side as in, for instance, trying to solve the border problem" (221). Seth's discursive formation about the strong affinities between the two oriental nations can be deciphered as a counter discourse to the West. As Pico Iyer, in *Video Night in Kathmandu*, counters the West by projecting the rise of the Asian nations as global cities, Seth counters it through projecting the possibility of the unity of the two Asian nations. If the two maintain strong ties, there will certainly be a challenge to the West politically and economically.

The textual evidences presented above clarify that Seth presents the experiences and observations of his journey without any fabrication. His itinerary has no connection with the West. Further, he shows respects to the local cultures and religions, allows the local people speak of their history, maintains amicable relationship with the individual people and wishes for friendly ties between China and India.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, this study claims that Seth's *From Heaven Lake* is a counter-orientalist travel narrative. Based on the available reviews on the text and theoretical perspectives, which are presented in the second and third sections of the study respectively, the study analyzes the travelogue, justifying that it destabilizes the conventional home-away-home journey paradigm of the travel writing genre, and avoids rendering negative differences upon the peoples and their cultures that he comes into contact with. The study also affirms that the narrative does not refer to the West—which was the home of the colonial travel writers—as both the departure and return points. Seth offers an alternative route of journey that begins at Sinkiang of China and ends at Delhi of India. He portrays the real China and Tibet without conjuring up false images with false descriptions. Unlike the colonial travel writers, he respects the local cultures and religions, allows the suppressed voice to come out, builds friendships with the local people, and urges India and China to form strong affinities at macro level. Finally, the study concludes that Seth offers an alternative way of knowledge production that counters the prevalent orientalist discourse. Further, it expects to open up a new avenue

in approaching the post-empire travel narratives, especially written by non-Western writers.

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