

**MAPPINGS: A REFLECTION OF VIKRAM SETH'S DIASPORIC IDENTITY***Tabinda Shamim, Research Scholar, Department of Languages, Integral University, Lucknow, India***Abstract:**

*Vikram Seth is an Indian diasporic writer who belongs to the generation of the writers of the 1980s. He is a postmodern poet who loves to write in the classical style. His style of writing outclasses him from other litterateurs of his generation. This paper is a modest attempt to place Vikram Seth as one of the most important and prominent Indian diasporic poets of the post-modern era. The paper presents a critical analysis of the most prominent poems of his first collection of poetry, Mappings, which highlights Vikram Seth's diasporic identity.*

**Key Words:** *Diaspora, nostalgia, multiculturalism, hybridity, transnationalism, exile, rootlessness, displacement.*

Diasporic Literature is a vast field of study, which covers a major part of literature produced in any language. It is an umbrella term for all the literary works written by the authors living outside their native country. It is a collection of writings by all the dislocated writers who come under one roof and create an archive of their own. They are connected to one another in terms of experiences and share the opportunity to express them at one common platform. Diasporic writers despite being away from their native lands write about their homelands and native culture. The diasporic literature deals with the themes of alienation, nostalgia, exile, rootlessness, displacement and search for identity. Some of the basic characteristics of diasporic writers are multiculturalism, transnationalism, hybridity and globalisation. Diasporic literature can also be seen as a collection of pollinated seeds from a native land. The pollination in terms of displacement of homogeneous characters of a particular culture or society may be voluntary or forced. The migration from homeland for any reason causes pain and sense of alienation. Scriptotherapy provides some relief to the diasporic and post-colonial writers but the painful experiences and their memories are never gone completely. In diasporic literature the imagination of the writer is painted with the glimpses of the reality and personal experiences. The memories and nostalgia play the most important role in the creation of a diasporic work.

Vikram Seth is a post-modern, Indian diasporic writer. He has expressed his expatriate feelings of loss and displacement in his works. *Mappings* is his first collection of poems. It was published in 1981, with which Seth introduced himself to the world as a writer. This collection deals with the juvenile experiences and feelings of the poet. The collection is a direct expression of the writer's experiences and feelings. Autobiographical elements and nostalgia form the base of all diasporic and post-colonial writings. Seth is an expatriate Indian writer who comes under the generation of poets writing after 1980s. He is a poet and novelist who has since 1980, produced a variety of works. He has experimented with the traditional style of poetry throughout his poetry collection but the themes are purely diasporic. *Mappings* features his love for metre and rhyme. It is a collection of poetry depicting love, sorrow, relationships, family, failures and his keen interest in traditional forms and rhymes. Nostalgia and alienation are the central themes of many of his poems. The memories of the family and the contradictions of the present and the past situations are seen in this collection.

The opening poem, 'Panipat' is an autobiographical poem with the central theme of cultural and psychological conflict between his native country, India, and the foreign country Seth has been living in

since years. The setting is modern and the poet uses the first-person narrative to sketch out a domestic scene. He refers in the first quatrain to his aunts who are shelling peas and gossiping while a parrot is cackling in the neem trees. From the very first stanza the author is describing an environment which is typically Indian:

My aunts sit in the courtyard,  
Gossiping, shelling peas,  
While around them parrots  
Cackle in the neem trees. (1-4)

The poet is sitting with his flute gliding from one stop to another on the scales of Lalit, a raag in Indian Classical music which, being serene and devotional, leads the poet into a separate world. He is home during a break from his studies. The use of Indian words like pandits, paneer, pan, etc. adds to his experimental style of writing. One finds alliteration in these lines: "Punjab, pandits, panir, / Panipat and pan" (19-20). The family, music, faces, food, land and surroundings drew him back home. Next he is seen associating the singing of the koel with the birds of the west like nightingale, wren and blackbird. While staring at neem, he is thinking of the elms. A conflict of feeling is evident here. He is simultaneously nostalgic for two places. Later in the poem he is offered a mango slice from his cousin and he chooses the slice with the seed. While tasting the sweetness of the mango, the poet becomes nostalgic and makes up his mind to go back home. The selection of the slice with the seed is representative of his selection of India over a foreign place.

The next major poem reflecting Seth's diasporic identity is 'Departure Lounge'. The poem describes the father-son relationship. It is a long poem depicting the nostalgic feelings of the poet while he draws the scene of his father and himself at an airport. The setting is the Departure Lounge of the Boston Airport where father and son are present. The son would be leaving and staying away for years. The poet recalls one of his early memories where he was scolded and beaten by his father because he had given a 50 paise coin to some rag girl. He says that he could never forget that day. In the following stanzas he recounts that he was just sixteen back then and took his beatings and words as 'unneeded cruelty'. He has a few memories of his kindness too. After expressing his contempt towards the not-so-happy childhood days, he says that he loves his father. He expresses his gratitude towards him by saying: "You gave us food and comforts, were obsessed / With 'Nothing but the best / Will do for my kids, '..." (59-61).

Then the narration moves to the biography of the father. The poet narrates one of the *scenes* from his father's childhood who was orphaned at two and ran away from his Baoji at fifteen. His father had screened his sorrows from his family and given them shelter. Then a brief description of how his father survived the rain while he was away from home is given. The poet realises that his father had hidden his love but he cried when Baoji died.

The poet again starts describing how he did not understand his father earlier but how his eyes are now open to reality. Then he becomes nostalgic and gives a brief description of the time and memories they have shared together with the family at home.

Thread of light rain, the reflected church,  
Talk of the family;  
Your work and mine; your paradigm  
For paradise-greenery  
And a small river; Delhi politics;  
Aradhana's latest tricks- (97-102)

The memory plays an important role in the life of a diasporic writer. As expressed by Salman Rushdie:

The shards of memory acquired greater status, greater resonance, because they were remains; fragmentation made trivial things seem like symbols, and the mundane acquired

numinous qualities. There is an obvious parallel here with archaeology. The broken pots of antiquity, from which the past can sometimes, but always provisionally, be reconstructed, are exciting to discover, even if they are pieces of the most quotidian objects. (Rushdie 215)

Then there is an expression of how athletics and diseases teach us to bear pain but cannot teach a person to live happily.

In the next few stanzas the poet elucidates how he has moved on with his life and left the parental strife, judgement and love behind. However he is still appreciative of his father's love and upbringing and emphasises this with the words: "I'll miss you. If I could / Have had a better father years ago / I could not now, I know" (136-138).

Another poem depicting the nostalgic feelings of the poet about her sister is 'Rakhi for Aradhana'. The poem comprises of six quatrains with the rhyme scheme of a b c b. The poem expresses the changing behaviour of human beings with time and how custom and tradition helps people to connect with each other. Seth has addressed this poem to his sister Aradhana. The poem starts with the poet expressing how the rakhi sent by his sister reminds him of how time changes but relationships and blood-ties remain intact. The nostalgia is evident here. Seth calls rakhi as a contract of trust. Her *rakhi* reminds him of how long he has been away from home:

It was a contract of trust  
With more than you. I know  
I left home too many  
Years ago. (5-8)

In the next stanza he mentions how he has struggled to tie that rakhi with his left hand. He wishes that his sister would have been with him to tie it on his wrist. Then he expresses that like her, he has also lost the half right of a brother. He promises her a gift in '78. In the next two stanzas he explains how they have changed with time but these customs have kept their memories alive. Circumstances change with the changing time but the relationship between a brother and sister will always remain.

The poem 'Home Thoughts from the Bay' is one of the most prominent poem elucidating Seth's diasporic feelings and pain. The poem depicts the pain and struggle of a person who is away from home. The poem starts with a reference of 'Down Highway 101', a north-south U.S. highway used for taking travellers and commuters on road trips. This route also gives a glimpse of the scenic views, taking the passengers through the coastal line, the wine country, Redwood forests and more. Like most of Seth's poems this poem also has the setting of a foreign place, California. The theme is of alienation and homesickness. The poem is written in first person narrative wherein the poet describes his journey through the Down Highway 101.

The poet is on the highway route towards the Bay. He mentions that he is in a van along with other passengers and the van is moving at a high speed. The sights throughout the journey seem 'apocalyptic' to him:

The sun  
Strikes long apocalyptic lines  
Of corrugated sheds, the tines  
Of Sutro Tower, billboards, wires  
The airport, scrap, discarded tyres; (4-8)

In the next lines the poet refers to himself as 'Dizzied'. He is in a confused state of mind and is unable to decide where to go. He wishes to visit the Bay area regularly as he is tired of his work and has no interest in anything anymore. One finds the use of epithet and hyperbolic expression in his poetry when he calls the Bay 'grimy-margined Bay' and expresses that he is 'bored to death'. He is homesick and questions himself: "Should I fly home? / Why am I here? / And yield to what? To whim? Fate? Fear?" (17-18). The poem has a depressing tone with the theme of alienation and homesickness. In the final lines the poet compares

himself to the moon which loiters in the sky without aim or purpose. The pain of an expatriate and his mixed feelings are explained throughout this poem.

'Mappings' is the title-poem of the collection and is one of the most prominent. The poem is about self-revelation and self-realisation. The poet's identity and his development as an individual is highlighted in the poem. It is a composition of five octets written in near rhyme.

The setting is of a beach alongside lake-pier in U.K. The windsurfers are gone and it is the time of sunset. The poet is sitting with wine, loquats and his manuscript. The breeze subsides and the sea birds pause and plummet. The wild ducks are manoeuvring in the weed clogged creek. The first stanza is beautified with the use of imagery. The hill turns blue during the time of sunset. The poet reads the lines he once wrote here but finds them bitter.

In the next stanza he states that he wrote these lines at a younger age and wishes to teach his younger self the ability to bear and recover with the pain of love. He wants to teach a young self the quality of healing the heart is capable of. An epithet is used to give meaning to the pain of love: 'the limb-trapped hurt of love'. It is asserted that search of true happiness and knowledge would take place after we no longer search about the geography of cells which is an incomparable strong desire.

In the third stanza an analogy is created between the poet and the mockingbird. The mocking bird could also mimic five different birds likewise the poet also is a polyglot. Then he realises that what he wrote at a younger age was no younger counterpart but a sense of self-importance and self-esteem. He finds his mappings of selves which may be despondent, witty, calm and uncalm but all belongs to him and is present in him. His memories are all alive in their true sense.

The last stanza sums up depicting him as a developed soul. The swim in the cool water of the lake has combined him with everything he was and he is. He compares his new self as a combination of a bright star which is large and is a wanderer. His poetry exists in him like one. He calls himself as seamless. The poem ends on a note that the poet is still open for future experiences of life and development of self:

The wine, my breathing, the recovering stars,  
Venus, bright as a plane, Jupiter, Mars,  
My pulse, my vagrant selves, my poetry,  
Seem here to inhere in a seamless me. (25-27)

Seth's diasporic identity is highlighted in the above lines. A migrant faces many challenging situations while trying to adjust in a new place or environment. Seth bearing a strong personality takes it as a challenge and is open to future experiences of life. He finds himself seamless and is ready like a wanderer to explore beyond the geographical borders.

One finds abundance of allusions and autobiographical elements in this poem. The poem elucidates the diasporic characteristics of the poet. The poet is home on the occasion of Diwali after three long years. There is a description of the festival which is beautified with the use of imagery:

Home. These walls, this sky  
Splintered with wakes of light,  
These mud-lamps beaded round  
The eaves, this festive night, (5-8)

The streets and the voices in the surrounding remind him of the memories he had there. The insensate fear and the love which was in abeyance comes to life, making him nostalgic.

In the next few stanzas it is said that how generations before, his father's family used to work as farmers and had a small shop. A contrast is created between generations, how the same family sent him to pursue studies abroad to gain the authoritarian seal of the Britishers who once ruled our country. He describes how learning a foreign language has become so important to get good jobs, good life and attain an elite status. He calls English the language of Ben Jonson and Wordsworth and calls them as his 'meridian names'.

In the next stanza the advent of the Mughals and the Britishers is mentioned. Mughals were the lover of musk-melon, rose, peach and nightingale. After them came the British rule who made us Indians, 'Orient'. He questions how an Englishman could refer to *divan-e-khas* the way Mughals used to refer. Then he mentions an Amir Khusro's Persian couplet in English: "If there is heaven on Earth / It is this; it is this; it is this" (39-40). Jahangir, one of the major rulers of the Mughal dynasty had repeated this couplet of Khusro when he saw Kashmir for the first time.

The poet talks about the Indians who got attracted to the English language and accepted a foreign language over hindi. The famous Indian writers are compared to the Shakespeare:

And Kalidas, Shankaracharya,  
Panini, Bhaskar, Kabir,  
Surdas sank, and we welcomed  
The reign of Shakespeare, (45-48)

The poet mentions Thomas Hobbes, an English political philosopher, to whom the poet calls 'undigested' and moves to John Stuart Mill who also was an English philosopher well known for his theory of Utilitarianism and liberalism and whose talks about liberty and global happiness marks the ending of the British rule. To quote U.R. Anantha Murthy here: "Between any two literatures there can be roughly three kinds of relations: first, the relation of the master and the slave; second, the relation of the equals; third, the relation between a developed country like Europe or America and a developing nation like ours." (Murthy 153)

In the following lines poet designates Mill with 'babu' and says that now he will follow him and bring development in the country: "I march on with your purpose; / We will have railways, common law / And a good postal service-" (54-56).

In the next stanza the poet is thinking about America, the elm-trees, swan, pork-pie, gable and scrimmage. And realises how even if we write in a foreign language we are never completely uprooted from India:

And as we title our memoirs

'Roses in December'  
Though we well know that here  
Roses grow in December. (61-64)

Then he moves on to state that how when we mourn for Vietnam our own local horrors never grip us. We are so much involved in our foreign selves. In the very next stanza the poet mentions that while he was drinking gin at a club he noticed that people start to show off and become arrogant when they are with the foreigners. Then there is stanza expressing the diasporic state of the poet. He realises that the breed of the expatriates are in exile everywhere. They have no home:

I know that the whole world  
Means exile for our breed  
Who are not home at home  
And are abroad abroad, (73-76).

The poet considers his tongue as being warped in English language but he says that he needs no words to gauge the beauty of the Ajanta caves and the tomb of Mumtaz. He also mentions his love for the Indian music Marwa. When he listens to the Marwa flute-notes coming from the neighbourhood, it holds him until the pain of exile fills his heart with fear and agony.

In the very next stanza the poet realises that he is on parole but is comfortable with the thought of being home. It is Diwali and he must enjoy with all his soul. He wants to absorb the peace and joy of his homecoming. He calls this visit as an anodyne, a painkiller. In the last stanza he mentions the famous Islamic inscription written on the gate of the Buland Darwaza at Fatehpursikri: "The world is a bridge. Pass over it, / Building no house upon it" (33-34). This inscription was also an advice given by Jesus to his

followers. He advised them not to consider this world a permanent home. The poem ends on a note that one should consider world a bridge and not get attached to it but one could only accept this fact with time. Time is considered as the healer of the heart.

The poem, 'A Morning Walk' also has the feeling of exile, alienation and search for identity as its theme. The poem is a dramatic monologue. One finds pessimistic tone in the poem. The poem starts with the description of a spider hung in the web. The poet finds it while he was on his morning walk. He says that the spider might be waiting for the visitors. He calls himself a visitor who is neither a Californian nor a fly. The poet considers himself a foreigner for the spider. He says that they both are unknown to each other with reference to their physical appearances. He is a foreigner for the Californian spider likewise the spider, too, appears to the poet very different from the Indian spiders. He describes the spider as: "...bloated, yellow, with some/ Sepia blotches not like those at home" (11-12).

In the next line he mentions the Indian spiders: "Our spiders are much blacker and much thinner, / Patrol their webs with greater frequency / And seem perpetually anxious about dinner;" (13-15). Suddenly the famous Indian writer Suryakant Tripathi 'Nirala' and his poem 'Bhikshuk' comes to his mind, the plight of the beggar, their hunger and pain.

The next two stanzas talk about the reality of the poor in India, the starving children, staring with white eyes. The poet says he is away from home, away from pain he used to feel while wandering in the Calcutta streets. He is away from the sight of begging children. He says that he is wandering among the affluent tress and is thinking how fair it is to share the world and not their pain. In a pessimistic tone he refers to the condition of the hungry children: "Their children's limbs will atrophy, brain rot / Swollen for lack of it..." (33-34). He is unhappy about them and confesses that living abroad has kept him away from the sight of home. He considers himself locked in the web of the foreign world. He says that he is blind in his happiness. He is blind to the reality of life. He questions himself: "A clod is washed away; the world is less; / But why disturb my quest for happiness?"

He feels for the people who are deprived of their basic needs and happiness. He finds that there is no one who could help them. There is no justice for these poor souls. In the last stanza he finishes with a comparison of his life with the other deprived souls. He says that he finds his life sweet, spends his time in writing poetry and take his meals on time. He is happy in life, is not starving of food and welcoming death like the poor farmers. He compares his life with people who are afraid of death, live in quietude and spend their life in the little relief from 'want' and 'grief'. The experience of an immigrant is reflected throughout the poem.

The poet's diasporic identity and its features are highlighted throughout the collection. The themes of alienation, exile, rootlessness, loss, nostalgia and other experiences of the poet are expressed in many poems. As an expatriate writer he has infused his work with the application and experiences of multiculturalism, hybridity and search for identity. The autobiographical elements play a significant role in the diasporic writings. The anxiety and fear is expressed in many of the poems. One finds a strong sense of loneliness and isolation in Seth's poetry. The pain of migration is evident in many of the poems. The quest for identity and self-realisation is present in the collection. Self-recognition and development of the soul of an expatriate forms the base of many of the works of the diasporic literature. Displacement or dislocation from homeland for any reason causes pain and agony in the migrant. There is always an adverse effect of migration. The expression of pain through writing also provides some relief to the writers but the longing for the homeland and the memory of the past keeps haunting the diasporic writers. The feeling of alienation always prevails in the diasporic community. Salman Rushdie who is also an expatriate expresses his feelings as:

Our identity is at once plural and partial. Sometimes we feel that we straddle two cultures; at other times, that we fall between two stools. But however ambiguous and shifting this ground may be, it is not an infertile territory for a writer to occupy. If literature is in part the

business of finding new angles at which to enter reality, then once again our distance, our long geographical perspective, may provide us with such angles. Or it may be that that is simply what we must think in order to do our work. (Rushdie 219)

No matter how much they are accepted in the new society, a sense of isolation and alienation creeps in. One finds theme of alienation in the poems like 'Home Thoughts from the Bay', 'Mappings' and 'A Morning Walk'. The diaporic writers represent an amalgamation of cultures and hybridity. Seth's multiculturalism is evident in most of the poems of the collection like 'Panipat' and 'Divali'. One finds a variety of themes in this collection. There are poems of romance like 'Sea and Desert' and 'Aubade', as well as poems with the themes of lost love and relationships like 'At Evening' and 'Six Octets'. There are poems questioning the identity of the poet and his sexual preferences like 'Dubious' and 'Guest'. Most of the poems are in the form of sonnets written in traditional rhyme scheme. He adds beauty to his poems with the use of poetic devices like alliteration, allusions, analogy, imagery, irony, epithets, repetition, monologue, apostrophe, hyperbole and metaphor etc.

Seth's use of colloquial language, abundant use of allusions and brevity of expressions in his very first piece of writing distinguishes him as an exceptionally gifted poet and presents him as one of the most erudite writers of the Indian diaspora.

### Works Cited

1. Chakraborty, Sutirtha. "Search for the Roots in Indian Diasporic Writing." *International Journal of English Language, Literature and Humanities* 4.2 (2016). Print.
2. Jain, Jasbir. *Writers of the Indian Diaspora: Theory and Practice*. Ed. Jain. Jaipur: Rawat Publications, 1998. Print.
3. Mohanty, Seemita. *A Critical Analysis of Vikram Seth's Poetry and Fiction*. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers & Distributors (P) Ltd., 2007. Print.
4. Murthy, U.R. Anantha. "The Search for an Identity: A Kannada Writer's Viewpoint." *CREATING THEORY: Writers on Writing*. Ed. Jasbir Jain. Delhi: Pencraft International, 2008. Print.
5. Pandurang, Mala. *Vikram Seth: Multiple Locations, Multiple Affiliations*. Jaipur: Rawat Publications, 2001. Print.
6. Ramakrishnan, D. *CRITICAL ESSAYS ON INDIAN ENGLISH WRITING*. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers & Distributors (P) Ltd., 2005. Print.
7. Rushdie, Salman. "Imaginary Homelands." *CREATING THEORY: Writers on Writing*. Ed. Jasbir Jain. Delhi: Pencraft International, 2008. Print.
8. Seth, Vikram. Interview by Ameena Meer. *BOMB Magazine*, Brooklyn. 1990. Print.
9. Seth, Vikram. *Mappings*. New Delhi: Penguin Books India (P) Ltd., 2014. Print.
10. Verma, Nirmal. "India and Europe: Some Reflections on the Self and the Other." *CREATING THEORY: Writers on Writing*. Ed. Jasbir Jain. Delhi: Pencraft International, 2008. Print.