CHAPTER 2

CHINESE DIASPORA: FROM HEAVEN LAKE

Travelling usually means learning familiar surroundings and going places that are, in one way or another, different. Experiencing different, however, may pose a threat to one's identity in that it questions one's concept of self and other. The issue of identity is a crucial one for post-colonial writers and travellers, who (as post-colonials) often lack a stable sense of self due to colonization and displacement. When looking at travelogues by post-colonial authors one finds that they repeatedly make reference to other literary texts, especially to imperial travellers and their travelogues. Some writers following 'in the footsteps' of their predecessors, re-tracing journeys and comparing experiences.

The post-colonial travelogue is one of travel writing's most prolific and innovative offsprings in the late twentieth century. Travel writing has become central to post-colonial studies. During the globalization of the twenty-first century and accessibility and feasibility of transportation, the threat of journey has become negligible. So, in post-post-colonial period, migration has become a common phenomenon for the progress of the people. In the changed scenario, cultural conflict or acculturisation is of no use. However, we can find multiculturalism in which all the cultures like different rivers assimilate in the ocean of globalization to adopt and pay regard to the culture of other with the same relevance.
There can be no doubt that British colonialism has left its mark on formerly colonized countries, whether in terms of architecture, flora, place, names, education or economics. Post-Colonial authors travelling in the former empire show a keen interest in the effects of colonialism on the countries visited. This is manifested in their accounts of such travels.

During the British empiricism from the nineteenth to the early twentieth century, the literature aims at proving the supremacy of the British empire as colonizers and the countries ruled over by the Britishers as colonized. After the Second World War, the socio-political literary and economic conditions of England was shattered into pieces and the writer of the Third world countries reacted against the colonizers and reinterpreted, re-analysed and proved that the British Literature is no more important and valuable in comparison to the non-British Literature. In this way, Post-Colonial Literature is considered as a reaction against the British Literature. Here, in Vikram Seth's *From Heaven Lake*, we find that an Indian writer highlights the experiences of his journey to his neighbouring country, China which is no less important than the European countries.

Although travelogue writing has existed in all languages right from the burgeoning of literature, it has become popular only in recent years. Prior to the later half of the twentieth century, travelogues were few and far between. Consequently, as a genre travelogue writing invited hardly any literary criticism until eminent writers like Eric
Newby, Pico Iyer, Graham Greene, V.S. Naipaul, Frank Delaney, Dan Jacobson, Dervla Murphy, Vikram Seth, J.M. Coetzee and Michael Ondantje, among other enriched with their contributions. Travel writing, which was previously viewed as being unworthy of analytical study by dint of it's not meeting the standards of literature has thus slowly been emerging as a genre worth its salt, "especially for scholars working at the representation of culture (s) in literature." The increasing number of new publication in the genre along with academic interest in it evinces this trend.

Vikram Seth's award winning travelogue From Heaven Lake is based on a journal maintained by him during the course of a 1981 hitchhiking trip home to India from China via Tibet and Nepal. Seth was a student in China's Nanjing University during the years 1980-82, on an Economics research scholarship supported by the Ford Foundation at Stamford University. In the summer of 1981, Seth and other fellow students had been taken on a sight seeing trip to the Sinkiang province of China in China’s north - western desert. A chance singing of the song Main Awaara Hoon-the theme song from the Indian block buster movie Awaara infront of Chinese officials won Seth a travel permit for Lhasa by road, which was a rarity since foreigners were generally severely restricted in their movements in China and individual forays into traveling were discouraged. Seth, however, had ways wanted to visit Tibet, and having got Lhasa stamped on his travel pass by the aforementioned good luck, he found himself hitching a ride in a truck across four Chinese provinces to travel home, against the dictates of both his finances and good sense. This journey was later shaped into the travelogue called From Heaven Lake.
The writer entitled the travelogue as *From Heaven Lake* which conveys two meanings-penalitical boundaries are man-made which not only tarnishes the beauty of the gift of Nature but also creates barriers among the people of the two nations. The Himalayas cover the range of the three nations referred by the writer such as China, Nepal and India but the three countries have their own political sovereignty and contrast with each other at different levels. Secondly, the poetic interpretation of the title cannot be ignored which indicates the vast range of the Himalayas which no doubt consists of natural beauty and as good as heaven. But the life in such areas is full of difficulties and challenges (*Parvatah doorato ramyah* which means mountaineous life is attractive from afar).

In *From Heaven Lake*, Seth harnesses his remarkable power of observation and blends it with the artistic sensibility to take the reader on an unforgettable journey through the most mysterious and least explored region of Asia. The flavour of the book is enhanced by the spice of a subdued sense of excitement and danger, resulting from hitchhiking through forbidden areas, neatly side-stepping "guiding" (Chinese regulations, to break which is sacrilege in China) and above all by the landscape itself - varied, desolate and bleak, unfriendly, yet breathtaking in its beauty-crossing four Chinese provinces; the north western desert of Xinjiang and Gansu, the basin and plate au of Qinghai and finally, the mountains of Tibet. In the course of his journey, Seth introduces the reader to the various nationalities inside China: Han Chinese who form a majority of the population; Uighurs who are muslims and ethnically closer to the Turks than to the Hans; and Tibetans who had ancient culture of their own.
From Heaven Lake is an ideal piece of travel writing delineating the geographical, socio-economic and cultural features of the region in their totality, without being clouded with issues of identity (usually a big issue with post-colonial writers). This latter fact makes the narrative light in tone, in happy contrast with works that tend to grapple with post-colonialism and nausea. The reason for this is that Seth is at home anywhere in the world; the aspect of the world being a global village is more real to him than is the aspect of a post-colonial existence. In the travelogue, Seth does not take pains to set himself apart as a 'traveller' as opposed to being a mere 'tourist'. The distinction is a fine one and most travelogue writers subscribe to it a greater or lesser degree, viewing 'tourism' in an offhandedly derogatory manner. Seth's goal, however, was not to follow in the literary foot steps of travel writers. He only wanted to experience and perceive get the feel of the country, and to see it first hand instead of jetting above it on a homeward bound flight. Writing a book about his travels was never at any point his initial goal. As a result, both his manner and style are refreshing. However from the book, one can discern that it is written in the spirit of a true traveller. A tourist accustomed to Thomas Cook tours would never hitchhike and even if he did he would probably constantly complain about the inconveniences and the hardship of travelling cross-country in an unplanned and spur-of-the-moment manner. Seth on the other hand, finds the beauty despite the hardships, is consistently uncomplaining of what must have been extremely trying circumstances, and even when accosted by strangers and hampered by unforeseen delays, manages to take it all in his stride, intent on his goal to see Lhasa unhindered by closely monitored tourist excursions.
Vikram Seth highlights the liberal Indian economy and large heartedness of Indians which contrast with the strict and stern economy as well as straightforwardness of China. As a result, Indian economy suffers whereas Cino economy is progressive and developed. Since, Vikram Seth went to Nanjing University for his research work in Economics, he aims at highlighting the first determination and strong administration of China in the interest of the nation. Although, Vikram Seth is fond of Hinglish, Urglish, Tanglish in some of his works and a great innovative writer e.g. *The Golden Gate* is a novel written in sonnet stanza form. In this travelogue, Vikram Seth highlights Cino economy as a role model for any of the developed countries. Seth deals with his strong endeavours to come back to his root nation via Tibet and Nepal which consists of many troubles and travails which the writer experienced during the adventurous journey. The book also consists of certain extracts of poems in order to highlight his poetic bent of mind. He also included photographs as well as maps which the writer gathered during his journey.

During this period, i.e. 1980-82, the poet in Seth seems to overshadow the scholar working towards a PhD in the economic demography of China at Nanjing University. He wished to return Delhi, his home via Tibet and Nepal. Being adventurous, Seth actually wanted to undertake a hitch-hiking journey. He had preserved the journal and the photographs he had taken during the journey and at the behest of his father he thought of penning down his travel from Heaven Lake to the Himalayas. He had to travel by taking lifts in the way by breaking away from the reliable routes of organized travel that resulted in an unusual and intriguing exploration of one of the World's best known areas.
This delightful travel book earned him name and fame. New Statesman hailed the book as "a perfect travel book" in the Sunday Telegraph and the Sunday Telegraph also remarked:

Utterly convincing and, unlike other recent accounts of Tibet, revealing...were there a prize for the most engaging and unexpected travel book of the year Vikram Seth should get it.

In 1983, however, he earned the Thomas Cook Award for it. The travel book From Heaven Lake-Travels through Sinkiang and Tibet (1983) begins with a map of the route Seth had taken and the first thing that any reader will notice is Seth's prose. The remarkable feature is the ease with which Seth is able to shift from verse to prose. The introductory paragraph bears ample proof:

The flies have entered the bus and their buzzing adds to the overwhelming sense of heat. We drive through the town first: a few two-storey buildings of depressing concrete housing government offices or large shops- foodstores .... (Jha 54)

A little later he describes the donkeys. He describes:

Donkey-carts pulled by tired-looking donkeys, pestered by flies and enervated by the dry, breezeless heat.... Even when they flick their tails, they do so listlessly.

(Seth 1)
Undoubtedly, the emotive coloration of details is made more suggestive as they are charged with certain significances arising out of the traveller's subjective consciousness. The poetic expressions that the author uses are worth examining. The buzzing of flies signifies the intense heat of the town, Turfan. There is an apparent freshness in the language. The latter description of donkeys is interesting and revealing, giving a vivid description of the extreme heat and also reveals his wit and sense of humour. One can easily visualize the intense heat, dryness and the exhaustion of people symbolized by the donkeys which have to make efforts to drag the carts. In fact, the shift from verse enables Seth to impart more durable perceptions, rendering a delightful language that is easy to sustain one's interest. Seth enumerates minute details about Turfan, the extreme north-west province of China bordering on the Soviet Union, a part of Sinkiang. Other than geographical and architectural details, one gets a complete picture viz, the minority problem, the Muslim culture and religion, colourful dress, the culture being more Turkish in feature than Chinese. He is quite comfortable with the amenities provided by Nanjing University for the students but he feels he is too bound, first by discipline and punctuality during sight-seeing and second that the movements of foreigners was closely scrutinized by the whims of the guide and Seth intends to explore them. There are hurdles like 'gunaxi' (a Chinese term) i.e. having personal connections in official places or 'lianxi' i.e. liaison with Chinese authorities.

He gives many interesting descriptions in his natural tone of humour, for example, as in this sentence:
The status of a foreign friend or 'foreign guest' in China is an interesting one. Officialdom treats the foreigner as one would a valuable panda given to fits of mischief. Explaining the simile "as one would a valuable panda." (Seth 9)

It brings in our mind the special attention that is accorded to a valuable foreigner for gaining favour. He gives a more humourous statement with a subtle irony:

On no account must any harm come to the animal. (Seth 9)

And, later, he informs that the Chinese people are disturbed and horrified by too much contact with foreigners while the banners announce:

We have friends all over the world. (Seth 9)

It is really commendable to observe the great ease with which he is able to erect a particular image in an undertone of humour without losing the critical insight.

The narrations are casually interspersed with light scenes and poems (composed by Seth). He gives a representative scene of local musicians singing and at their behest he sings the song from 'Awaara' (the celebrated Hindi movie in 1950). Seth, in fact translates the title song into English:
No family, no world have land nobody's love .... (Seth 11)

He also mentions how the song 'helped him get favour from the Chinese police. In fact, the very nature of Seth's travel book enables him to interact much more closely with the Chinese people, having the twin assets of a brown skin and the song from 'Awaara' to break the ice. His feeling of homelessness is reinforced through the song.

He discovers a ridiculous fact about the Latin and Arabic scripts which kept changing in each generation with the result that the third and first generation could communicate with each other in Arabic script while the one belonging to the second generation could not communicate with either as his script was Latin. He comes to know about the closure of mosques during the Cultural Revolution in the recent past. The aftermath of Cultural Revolution concerns him throughout the book since the destruction of its glorious past, its art, its cultural heritage is apparent to him everywhere where destruction of humanity concerns him greatly. His reflections over many such details reveal thoughtful, humane and tolerant outlook of a traveller.

He decides to return home i.e., Delhi through Tibet but cannot disclose his intentions for the fear of being caught by the Chinese officials who are skeptical about the movements of foreigners. Moreover, he has no understanding of Tibet either. Regarding modern constructions, he tells us that one can see some designs, but there is monotony even in dress and colour and very few recreational sports can be sighted in Lanzhou when he sets out from Beijing.
Seth reaches Liuyuan in order to get a lift for Lhasa. He has to wait for a truck going to Lhasa that is 1,800 kms and because of the terrible road, it would take ten days. Despite few problems owing to regulations, the author finds the Chinese people generally friendly and the fact that he was able to recover his bag from another driver only reveals the honesty and sincerity of all the people who had willingly volunteered to help him. He also tells us how the Chinese government takes care of the foreigners and also about the co-operation of local Chinese, in certain instances.

The beauty of Chaidam Basin amazes him and he narrates it in a picturesque manner. He gives such an artistic description (like that of a painter) to the desert for instance, in this poetic description:

By afternoon we descend into a pastel-coloured basin, also treeless, and with wide horizons, blues of sky and lake and distant ranges, purples and browns of the soil, white clouds, every colour is light, pastel, delicate .... I take a few photographs: grassless, treeless, birdless stone and pebble and rock. (Seth 72)

He befriends Sui, who agrees to give him lift on his truck from Liuyan to Lhasa, and observes his street-smartness, his accessibility to friends all through the way. He describes all the mundane activities, their talks, their discomforts, the floods in the desert at Dunhuang, the floods that wash the road from Nilamu to Zhangamu and the discomfort caused to the author due to the altitude and the bad shape of roads. We are
informed that Yak is the mainstay of the Tibetan rural economy that provides them milk, hide, meat and transport. The author gets inured to the yak-butter tea. As he sees China from a close distance, he is able to critically assess the policies of the two nations, their advantages and disadvantages. He feels that China is undoubtedly better off in terms of social care and distribution as the infants and the aged are better looked after. Besides, in China, people are kept out of cities by means of both, controlled ration-coupon distribution and force, while in India, abject poverty looms large and unlike China, India has hardly made any headway in population control. Due to non-fulfilment of basic needs viz, food, shelter and clothing there is lack of patriotism in India. Regarding China's rigid economy, he remarks that the lack of creativity and innovation in China that approves of only 'politically correct' (Seth 104) things is a serious drawback. Seth, however, gives a sane hypothesis:

Yet it is difficult to say which works better - the cumbersome slow-reacting Chinese economy or our economy in India. (Seth 104)

He shows apprehension for Indian economy which despite being liberal, poses great and serious problems like inefficiencies and inequalities i.e., inefficiency of people working in government or public sector and inequality in society characterized by rich and poor, privileged and underprivileged where the sole purpose of officials seems to be to stifle the working in someway or the other. Seth is critical of the working of the Indian government that remains mostly interested in the perpetuation of self-interest and doing things superficially, where national interest becomes secondary. India has characteristic
problems due to its huge and complex variety, owing to the existence of several languages and lack of a strong historical tradition of unity. Secondly, he feels that the democratic set-up is a difficult system to preserve for a poor country for it inevitably breeds corruption. At the same time he does not deny the limitations of Dictatorship and for this he refers to certain instances pointed out in the popular newspaper, People's Daily. In fact, the impact of Dictatorship is quite clearly revealed through Norbu, his companion at Lhasa and the trials of his family members during the Chinese Revolution. Their experience speaks of the savage treatment and atrocities on Tibetans and the narration is extremely touching.

Such revelations make Seth feel that India has been a better country in terms of humanity (compared to inhuman treatment of China to Chinese people and Tibetans) and large-heartedness as we are largely tolerant and have believed in being and letting others free. The most shocking revelation of the Cultural Revolution is the demolition of the ancient arts and the artefacts; such instances certainly astonish him. Seth admits that the prospect of visiting China had made him quite enthusiastic but after having seen it, he is convinced of its drawbacks just as India has its own share of loopholes. Seth is a master when it comes to describing through images and similes. The dark imagery that he uses is not to be missed out for its suggestiveness. He says:

....I notice again the angled roofs of the Jorkhang, no longer gold but black against the early night sky, and high behind it two solitary bright stars, or perhaps planets. Between them is a light paper kite, rhomboid, tail-less, like the ones we
have at home, a prisoner of string and wind, flying now in one direction, now in another, with no appraisable trend or endeavour. (Seth 46)

Undoubtedly, the bright and luminous picture that he had of China's prosperity and better economy weighs heavily against the dark chapter in the history of the Chinese people. The golden roofs appear 'black' and they seem to toll the woeful tales of several people writhed in anguish and tears. The kite is caught between the roofs and solitary stars like a prisoner, like a captive. Seth perceives the Chinese and Tibetans caught in the dictatorship form of government. They want to seek freedom but are helplessly caught, forcibly being thrown from one end to another.

Seth also describes the Sera monastery at Lhasa, the ceremony of offering human corpses to the eagles after mixing with the meal. The description is really heart-rending. At Lhasa, he has to look for an exit visa to China through Zhangmu, Tibet, as much to his chagrin, he is informed that the road and bridge between Tibet and Nepal have been swept away by the floods. The situation poses great problems but once again the Chinese officials and people help him out. Seth is full of praises for them. He says:

Time and again, with no thought other than kindness, people have helped me along in this journey. And this experience is merely a continuation of what I have felt throughout my travels in China: a remarkable warmth to the outsider from a people into whom a suspicion of foreigners has so long been instilled. (Seth 177)
Seth, the traveller is seeking to uncover the real China from the veil of ideology. From his privileged position, he tells us if the people are happy, sad or indifferent. He wants to clarify that the people of China have always extended help and support to him; as a foreigner he wants the readers to dispel any thought of hostility or indifference from the Chinese to foreigners.

From Nepal, he takes a flight for home in New Delhi. On the flight he tries to recapitulate the names of places and people he has met. He ruminates over India and China’s relationship and hopes that they were better developed. He regrets that despite the proximity of each nation:

to the same landmass there is no such thing as an Asian ethos or mode of thinking. (Seth 178)

He feels it is imperative:

to know others’ culture to enrich one’s life and also to feel more at home in the world... (Seth 139)

Undoubtedly, Seth is able to understand the economy of China, especially in comparison to India’s because of his study of the economic demography of China. Yet, many of his views and feelings are mainly literary and his own. This travel book is not only
informative; it is a treat for book lovers and for fiction lovers. It reveals Seth's understanding of history, politics and society.

*From Heaven Lake* (1983) is a travelogue describing Seth's experiences on a trip from Nanjing University to his home in Delhi via Tibet and Nepal. *From Heaven Lake* (1983) is a detailed account of an impromptu hitchhiking trip undertaken by Vikram Seth in 1981 from North-Western China to Tibet, and then across the border into Nepal. Described as a "travelogue of gun-like perfection" and "the perfect travel book", the book received the Thomas Cook Travel Book Award - Britain’s most prestigious travel writing prize in 1983. Although Seth found no American Publisher yet it was consequently published by Random and Vintage following Seth's tremendous success with *The Golden Gate*.

In this travelogue, instead of merely discussing the places to stay or sights to see, Seth demonstrates the value of cultural adaptability and sensitivity as he describes the land, the people he met, and the fragility of Tibet's cultural heritage in the wake of China's cultural Revolution. In this travelogue, he has published an account of his unorthodox travels in China using unconventional modes of travel. The book offers an intriguing exploration of places and people in China and Tibet. In his brief introduction to the first edition of the book, Seth tells us that the journey was undertaken when he lived in China as a student at Nanjing University from 1980 to 1982. In the summer of 1981, he retrieved home to Delhi via Tibet and Nepal. The land route, which he followed on his hitchhiking journey in trucks, originated is the oases of north west China and went on to the Himalayas crossing four Chinese provinces: Xinjiang (Sinkiang) and Gansu in the
northwestern desert, the basin and plateau of Qinghai, and finally Tibet. *From Heaven Lake* is a leisurely account of Seth's travels and has some truly poetic description of the natural landscapes of China and warm evocations of ordinary Chinese men and women with whom he struck up friendship.

The book is based on a journal Seth kept on what he "saw, thought, and felt" as he travelled through various parts of the People's Republic of China as a Economics research student at the University of Nanjing, in 1980-82. His audacious journey begins when he decides to break from official routes of organised group travel. Seth's excursion takes him through some of the least known of Chinese provinces (Xinjiang, i.e. Sinkiang, and Gansu in the north-western desert, then the basin and plateau of Qinghai). Seth excels in the poetic descriptions of natural splendour, as in his word pictures of the spectacular region of Tian Chi or Heaven Lake, "an area so large that one can wander for days, and not exhaust its limits"; and the breathtaking sights of the sparsely populated pastel-coloured Chaidam basin. While this trip enables Seth to see and experience what is off the usual tourist's map, it also gives him the opportunity to interact with a cross section of peoples ranging from nomadic Muslims to Chinese bureaucratic officials, and Buddhist-Tibetan counter-revolutionaries.

Seth begins the foreword to the 1990 edition of *From Heaven Lake* by protesting against the brutality of the Chinese authorities against non-violent Tibetan demonstrators, on the thirtieth anniversary of the Dalai Lama's forced flight from Tibet. He also condones the tragic carnage of the students who were staging a peaceful demonstration to demand
political reform, in Tiananmen Square on June 4, 1989. The foreword sets the tone of humanist concern that pervades the entire travelogue. While the book is not intended as a summary of the political or economic situation, it does offer analytical insights in very readable prose. Seth also explains that there have been further changes and revelations under the economic liberalisation started under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping, since his visit to China in 1982. His discussions of China must therefore be regarded within a temporal framework.

Meenakshi Mukherjee points out that the project of constituting a national identity within Indian writing in English has normally been predicated upon two simultaneous imperatives; an erasure of differences within the border and accentuating the differences with what lies outside. As a language, English automatically achieves the first, and the second is facilitated "when a homogeneous Indian tradition is pitted against an equally unified Imaginary West." (Mukherjee 19)

Mukherjee adds that the non-western worlds of African and Asia have never had a part to play in this 'dialectic of alterity', except for writers like Amitav Ghosh and Seth who have brought them in, though marginally, by using locations like Egypt, Cambodia and China. Seth comments in an interview:

Living in China for a while, I realised we shouldn't be obsessed with the west. We should consider our place not only with respect to American and English cultures, but also with respect to cultures like China's. I'm very interested in our own
multiplicity of cultures (Mukherji 35)

Although Seth is on leave, absent from Stanford while he writes the book, he emphatically reiterates in the introduction: "I am an Indian". *From Heaven Lake* is a record of personal, cross-cultural interaction between a member of one Asian giant, travelling through another. Seth draws attention to the lack of exchange between Indians and the Chinese in recent times, in spite of the close geographical proximity. "Neither strong economic interest nor the natural affinities of a common culture tie India and China together. The fact that they are both part of the same landmass means next to nothing. There is no such thing as an Asian ethos or mode of thinking" (Seth 178). He adds:

If India and China were amicable towards each other, almost half the world would be at peace. Yet friendship rests on understanding; and the two countries, despite their contiguity, have had almost no contact in the course of history. (178)

...There are accounts of ancient India in the travelogues of Chinese traders and scholars but Seth points out that the number of travelers who made the journey over the Himalayas were limited in number: and not many more have made the voyage by sea; trade while it existed, have always been constrained by geography. In Tibet and South-East Asia, we find a fusion of the two cultures; but the heartland of the two great culture zones have been almost untouched by each other. The only import antexception to this is the spread of Buddhism. (178)
There are a number of intertwining discourses that can be identified in *From Heaven Lake*. Apart from the travel narrative, the text also includes autobiography (offering interesting details on Seth's familial background, childhood years spent in Patna, etc.) and discourses of economics, art and philosophy. As the narrator Seth is a travel writer, as the protagonist he is the traveller and as travel writer he is an economist and cultural theorist. Seth presents, as an economist would, a comparative perspective of what India and China have done for their people in the course of the last thirty years. He argues that while the Chinese administration may have evolved a better system of social care and better administrative hierarchy, it, for all its 'quasi-democratic propaganda' is not answerable to the people's democracy (103). As an artist on the one hand, and an economist on the other, Seth outlines the dilemma of choice between democratic rights of freedom of expression and action, and the right to a decent standard of living. "I remember reading a question in an economics textbook", he states: "If you were to be born tomorrow, would you prefer to be born in China or India?" And Seth answers: If I could be guaranteed the lucky place in the Indian sweeps takes that I at present occupy, there is no question as to what my answer could be; even if I were poorer than the average Chinese child, I would still prefer to be in India. But if I were born to the inhuman, dehumanizing misery in which the poorest third of our people live, to the squalor and despair and debility that is their life, my answer would not be the same. Man does not, of course, live by bread alone, but with so little of it he can hardly be said to live at all.(104-5)
According to Seth, the Indian achievement of the last thirty years "has been in a different, more nebulous, and in a sense more difficult direction". He reads the success of the Indian nation-state in its survival as a homogeneous entity: "The country has not fragmented: a whole generation of Indians has grown up accepting that an independent and united India is the normal state of affairs". Seth states that "in the first few year of a nation, that is already a great deal: one cannot expect a powerful patriotism. A country with more than a dozen languages with no strong historical tradition of unity, faces problems that a culturally and linguistically cohesive China does not even have to consider" (105). While Seth brings to notice the variations and the similarities between the two countries and cultures, his effort, at times, does come across as an Indian writer explaining both India and China to a western audience. Nevertheless, this travelogue does serve to correct reductionist reading of communist China as created through stereotyping by the western media.

The travelogue commences with Seth at Turfan, an oasis town in the depression in Xinjiang, the extreme north-west province of China bordering on the Soviet Union. The name Xinjiang (which means 'New Borderland') has a population quite different from the Hans, who make up more than nine-tenths of China's population. A dispute between the two imperial powers has left the boundary in dispute, and the settlers or nomadic peoples scattered on both sides of a border negotiated or controlled over by others, feel little sense of allegiance to the Russians who dominate the USSR or the Hans-popular who are in a majority in China. They are Muslim in culture and religion. The script of the Uighur language is Arabic. Not only are these people are able to communicate and read in the
same, but Seth can also bring in a use of limited Urdu words into his interaction with them.

It is July, and Seth is there as part of a three week tour organised by the Nanjing University for a mixed group of foreign students, largely from the richer countries of Japan and the US. He is unhappy against constraints inherent in group travel but to break loose he must overcome restrictions peculiar to travel in China where the movement of foreigners is tightly controlled. Due to sheer luck, he is able to get a pass to Tibet endorsed because of two unlikely events linked to his Indianness'. (Such passes are forbidden to foreigners, except for wealthy tourists whose program is planned so as to preclude time for 'individual initiative or exploration'.) At an evening programme organised for the group, he sings a theme-song from the popular Raj Kapoor-Nargis Hindi film of the 1950s Awaara, which has cut across language and culture barriers and is astonishingly popular among the Chinese. He is then lucky enough to meet Akbar, an officer at the general police station who evinces a very keen interest in Indian movies.

Next, Seth is faced with the dilemma of how he will avail of this endorsement for Lhasa. The daring idea of travelling by road, and trying to continue overland to India, begins to germinate in Seth's mind. As an Indian citizen, he is unlikely to get permission to cross over the Chinese border with India which is disputed, and so the border with Nepal may provide a possible exit route. The Chinese exit visa which he already has specifies no particular point of exit and so Seth convinces himself that to exit from Tibet will be just as valid to fly out from Shangai. The prospect of crossing the Himalayas is motivating enough to warrant a journey all the way back to Nanjing and Beijing to complete the
necessary formalities, and then travelling for almost a week merely to return to the same point to continue onwards with his journey. Once he completes the required formalities, Seth takes a train back towards the north-west. His actual trek begins at the desert town of Liuyuan, a dusty terminus for truck traffic that marks the start of the road south to Germu in the province of Qinghai. It is the first of August and he must be in Delhi by the end of the month when his travel pass and residence permit would have expired. He has just four weeks to complete his journey.

Seth hitchhikes a lift on a truck and his companions are the thirty-five year old chain-smoking Sui, his sulky fifteen year old nephew Xiao San and Gyanseng, a Tibetan of very few words. What is ahead on the one thousand eight hundred kilometres stretch of road, not unmetalled for half its length, is the possibility of floods and the biting cold of the Germu plateau. After Germu, the journey continues south up onto the Qinghai-Tibet plateau four thousand to five thousand metres high. Suffering from severe discomfort of the cold and altitude sickness, Seth writes of the plight of his companions and himself:

"Here we three, cooped, alone, tibetan, Indian, Han, against a common dawn catch what poor sleep we can, and sleeping drag the same sparse air into our lungs, and dreaming each of home sleep talk in different tongues.(98)

When the truck finally descends the Tangula range, they find the road waterlogged. As there is no hope of extricating the truck now stuck in the mud, Seth has to leave Sui and to hitch a ride with another truck on the main road. When he finally reaches the Lhasa
foreign office, he learns to his dismay that his exit visa with no specified port of exit does not apply to Tibet, and that he needs a specific exit permission for Tibet which is a land border. Further, the Lhasa-Kathmandu road has been destroyed by floods and the bridge washed away. The Nepalese Consulate-General in Tibet, Mr Shah, suggests that the only possible way he can avoid the circular route of returning back to India via Honk Kong, is to head for Nilamu and walk from there for four days on foot through the hills, cross the border into Nepal, take a bus to Kathmandu, and finally catch a flight to Delhi. At Zhangmu, Seth leaves the Chinese checkpoint and begins his walk through a forest infested with leeches, mites and midges. He doesn't realise just exactly when he crossed the actual 'border' until he is suddenly stopped by a Nepali customs officer speaking in excellent Hindi who sternly informs him:

... that stream there, that's the border. You've just crossed it.

Seth remarks wryly:

this is the first time a customs officer has stepped out for behind a tree to announce himself." (170)

He draws attention to the irony of political borders by commenting on the woman wringing her clothes in the very stream that marks the border: "She couldn't care less which country she is in." (170)

As he moves along the red-soiled valleys towards Kathmandu, the similarities to
Dehradun, where spent high school years rekindle nostalgia within the traveller. He wonders how "these things now affect me more powerfully than I would ever have imagined" (173) and ponders:

... that I can be so affected by a few phrases on the bansuri, or by a piece of indigo paper surprises me at first, for on the previous occasions that I have returned home after a long absence abroad, I have hardly noticed such details, and certainly have not invested them with the significance I now do. (173)

Seth attributes these sentiments to the gradual progress of his journey:

With air travel the shock of arrival is more immediate: the family, the country, the climate all strike with simultaneous impact, so that the mind is bewildered, and the particular implications of small things obscured.(176-77)

The return to home is all the more poignant, because Seth explains that it is the "first time parents, my brother, my sister and I have been together in seven years" (177). Seth's flight finally touches down at Delhi airport. The custom officer asks him if he has "anything to declare".

Journeys have been undertaken from the earliest times for a number of reasons. Most importantly, the voyage holds out a promise of transformation and deeper knowledge. At one point of time in his journey Seth contemplates:
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 students days in England, where I ate dalmoth and dreamt 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. (35)

In the poem "From a Traveller" (The Humble Administrator's) Seth reflects:

... I realise that I go around the world gathering as much nostalgia as knowledge, for I can see that no sooner will I have moved to an Eccentric State than the whole weight of the Central Kingdom will ravage my memory.... (35)

Seth marvels at those travellers "who, out of curiosity or a sense of mission, wander through unfamiliar environments for years on end." He adds:

It requires an attitude of mind more capable of contentment with the present than my own. My desire to arrive is too strong. (175)

In African Journeys (1991), Mildred Mortimer explains that the notion of travel calls forth "a series of binary oppositions, for journeys are desired or feared, successful or thwarted, individual or collective... Most important, the voyage holds out a promise of
transformation, of broader horizons and deeper knowledge "(169). Mortimer also points out that the traveller in strange surroundings often posits "another binary opposition the crucial distinction between self and other" (169). She explains in detail how the European travel writer in Africa often promoted a fictionalised stereotype of the African, or 'the other', as primitive, and uncivilised, and their narratives in turn legitimised imperialism and colonisation. Mortimer draws on Marni L. Stanley's distinction between two types of travel writing in *Traveller's Tales: Showing and Telling, Slamming and Questing* (1986). The first category is 'slamming' wherein the traveller criticises the 'other' and focuses on his own sensibility rather than contemplating a world view other than his own. 'Slamming', according to Stanley, is apparent in V.S Naipaul's *North of South* and Shiva Naipaul's *A Bend in the River* which does not offer any genuine third world perspective but rather reaffirms colonial stereotypes. (Incidentally, Seth happens to be carrying with him a copy of Naipaul's *India: A Wounded Civilisation* left for him by his American friends.) Stuck at Dunhuang because of flood waters, Seth sits by the truck fending off flies and reads Naipaul. The book, he reflects, "makes for sad and serious thought". He adds:

I can't help feeling distressed by what he has to say about India, but it is better than a hundred books of calmer but less insightful analysis. It is a complex, driven book—it forces me either into agreement or argument. (92)

The second category is that of 'questing' or possessing a desire and ability to learn as well as a commitment to expand horizons. The journey leads to 'knowledge' and an understanding that the writer exploring unknown territory could not have discovered on
his own. As a traveller, Seth's insists on a certain degree of familiarity with the cultural milieu that he is experiencing. This is reflected, for instance, in his expression of frustration at knowing very little about the significance of the minutiae at The Potala, once the winter palace of the Dalai Lama. Seth makes allowances for his ignorance of Tibet before his actual journey commences:

I know almost nothing about Tibet. My understanding of what I see will lack the counterpoint of expectation, of a previous comprehension, however fragmentary ...
the freshness of the vision may compensate for the ignorance of the viewer.
(33)

He however rues later on:

My excuse about the fresh vision that ignorance brings to a complex environment now makes no sense to me." (139)

Once Seth reaches Tibet, he is unhappy about the palace which has too much of diverse objects. Reacting to the clutter of incompatible stimuli, he comments: "It is like being force-fed onions with condensed milk." (140)

Seth does offer possibilities of understanding a different socio-cultural environment and makes a conscious attempt to bridge the gap between the self and the other. There is a great deal of sensitivity and respect in Seth's description of the funeral ceremony near the Sera monastery where he witnesses human corpses being cut up, minced and fed to
'disciplined eagles'. While this is a rite that is increasingly being replaced by cremation, Seth sees it in the context of religious rituals towards the dead.

Christians and Muslims bury their dead, 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 with meal and fed to the eagles. (150)

Seth explains that the status of the outsider or the 'foreign friend' in China is an interesting 'if unnatural one'. At an official level, the foreigner is viewed as a 'threat' in terms of possibility of influencing those he comes in touch with. "Officialdom treats the foreigner as one would a valuable panda given to fits of mischief. On no account must any harm come to the animal. On the other hand, it must be closely watched at all times so that it does not see too much, do too much on its own, or influence the behaviour of the local inhabitants" (9). The People's Daily thunders against the corrupting influence of 'their' music and clothes, and sexual morality, 'their' lack of seriousness and "their exploitative intentions". China is to learn foreign science and technology, not foreign habits and mores. The term 'their' is synonymous with the West. As a consequence of this policy, a visitor to China is considered not merely foreign "but in some sense weird". The outsider is treated with suspicion as the unknown 'other'. Seth explains how his contact with the Chinese is rented by a feeling that one's foreignness is a crucial element of one's character (43). Seth counter-argues that contact "cannot be as aseptic as all that". In the context of travel, contact is inevitable. The Chinese students who are abroad will not
return home unaffected by their general experiences. Nor will foreign students refrain from contact with their classmates. While the Chinese word for their country is simply 'mid-land', "an indication of their assumption of centrality in the scheme of things"(9), Seth points out that those friends he made who were knowledgeable about the world outside were willing to conceive that the 'mid-land' could be the 'out-land for outlanders' (10). In a world where foreign relations are determined by little other than realpolitic, Seth repeatedly mentions the warmth of company, offered with openness and good will. He points out that while officialdom may be disturbed by too much contact between Chinese and non-Chinese, among the people themselves there is a general sense of friendliness and a curiosity towards the individual foreigner which is remarkable considering the anti-foreignness of the Chinese past, and indeed the stigma previously attached to contact with the waiguoren (out-land persons).

Wearing the conventional blue clothing common to communist China, Seth does not stand out as the typical commercial tourist. His greatest advantage is his fluency in the Chinese language which allows him to have animate conversations with fellow travellers from different regions of China—Han, Uighur, Kazakh, Mongolian and Tibetan. Often Seth refers to himself by means of his 'Chinese name' XieBinlang (77). Snatches of interaction with common persons include discussions on Sino-Indian relations. There is the co-passenger on a train who commiserates that "the 1962 border conflict was just an unfortunate incident, the fault of governments, not of peoples" (40); the old cap seller whose face lights up at his 'Hindu' visitor, and to whom Seth salutes 'salaam alekum' in farewell, knowing he will understand' (28); and Quzha, a
border soldier during the Sino-Indian conflict, who comments on the war:

A strange task. You couldn't tell where the border was. One day it was here, another day there. We retreated, they occupied, and vice versa. We just did what we were told. I'm glad things have improved in our relations. (50)

Seth shares that it is the 'refreshing fellowship' of his fellow travellers and easy acceptance of his presence "that makes one, through the enjoyment of their company, love the country from which they come" (10). "One's attitudes towards a place are only partly determined by the greatness of its history, or the magnificence of its scenery," states Seth, "When I think of China, I think first of my friends and only then of Qin Shi Huang's tomb." (36)

Despite his working knowledge of Chinese, Seth bemoans the fact that there are certain areas that Chinese language courses do not include. "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 children, the riddles; all the things that are most important in the childhood of Chinese people."

Seth exhibits a keen sensitivity of the mechanics of language as a earner of cultures. Oral narratives and folklore are an integral part of the collective consciousness. Without such things, as Seth puts it:

one cannot understand the wealth of references made to a common past, the
casual assumptions 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'. (84-85)

In order to theorise the relationship between language and culture, Seth takes time to insert a lengthy description of a curious dream he has had, wherein he has been appointed the Chairman of the Asian languages department at Stanford. Within his dream, he inaugurates a six-month intensive course in Chinese and it is structured in such a way that each week of the course corresponds to a year in the life of the Chinese child. For the first week, students lie on cots, making burbling noises, while teachers talk to each other in Chinese. The 'babies' are sung to sleep with lullabies in their mother tongue. A few elementary words are taught in the second week, when toddlers are expected to display a proper curiosity for the names of objects. However, in conformity with the 'Mayonnaise principle', the intake of a new lexical information has to be controlled "learning a language is like making Mayonnaise: add too much at once and the mixture will separate out" (85). Slowly, through the compressed years, the students come into contact with nursery rhymes, comic books, slang, sneers, and then go on to participate in adult conversations, read short stories and perform songs for visiting party dignitaries. Then, as they rush through adolescence, they are introduced to political thought, history, literature, bureaucracy, slogans and obscenities. Seth concludes:

By the end of the six-month course, in their twenty-sixth year, my students have some idea of their Chinese peers. (85)
China has not been spared by growing tentacles of the English as a language, of power and privilege. Seth comes across Chinese students and government servants who are anxious to learn English but for whom the opportunities for speaking English are almost nonexistent. The foreigner becomes a 'punch-bag' for language practice. "Something that happens add nauseam on the Nanjing streets whenever foreigners are spotted... No place is safe, no privacy respected by the worst of these 'language rapists', who are only interested in you for your language. And insist on speaking in English." (116) Policies of economic liberalisation have led to a spurt in tourism in China and this in turn has led to the construction of a number of new five star hotels under collaboration with foreign firm... He has picked up a book called *Everyday Language for Hotel, Personnel -1000 English Sentences* intended to aid the Chinese reader to communicate and comprehend better in English. Sample sentences quoted ("it is a misunderstanding, I am afraid", "the Chinese people and the Japanese people are very friendly towards each other", "I want to have a manicure") are self-indicative of the slant of the interaction between the English speaking tourist/traveller and the Chinese employee. (135)

The artist in Seth reacts with pain at the consequences of the cultural revolution wherein so much "of the brilliance and beauty of a great civilisation was in a few years destroyed by its ideology-infected children, the Red Guards". This was a period in which not "merely everything foreign but everything that spoke of the Chinese past "was condemned, and, if possible, obliterated". "Temple after temple, mosque and memorial hall and monastery, painting and screen and book and vase, artefact and artist; almost
anyone or anything vulnerable or creative or non-conformist was damaged or smashed". Seth cannot reconcile himself to the inhibition of creativity and innovation, particularly in literature where only politically 'correct' works saw the light of publication. He adds:

this is something that is not likely to happen in the democracy—however halting, hypocritical and hopeless—that is India. (104)

Stranded at Dunhuang, Seth wanders towards a Buddhist temple in ruins which was pulled down and burnt in the cultural revolution. Amidst the desolate and lonely surroundings, Seth remembers a line from Leopardi, "And now above the cities the goat browses". But for Leopardi, Seth reflects:

it was Vesuvius that destroyed and nullified the works of man, while here the burnt walls speak of a sadder, more purposeful, more purposeless destruction. (61)

In his condemnation of the 'purposeless' cultural revolution, Seth offers no purview of the history of the communist revolution and the reason why it gained such momentum under the leadership of Mao Tse-Tung. He makes no allowance at all for the crippling economic and social disparities that had led to the rise of communist ideology in China. Nor does he analyse the ideological principles that compelled practitioners of the cultural revolution to contest bourgeoisie forms of art and religion.
As an artist, Seth subscribes to the idea of a *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*—the idea of one world. Hypnotised by the waterfalls of Nilamu, he reflects on the pan-universality of natural elements that prevail over the political boundaries enforced by mankind:

I will during my life be certain to drink some molecules of the water passing this moment through the waterfall I see. Not only its image will become part of me; and its particles will become a part not merely of me but of everyone in the world. The solid substance of the earth more easily cohere to particular people or nations, but those that flow—air, water—are communal even within our lives. (166)

For Seth, beauty and art transcend time and boundaries. Listening to the music of the flute on the streets of Kathmandu, Seth considers it as at once the most universal and most particular of sounds, "There is no culture that does not have its flute... Each has its specific fingering and compass. It weaves its own associations." The particular merges with the universal, when to comes to an art form like music: "Yet to hear any flute is, it seems to me, to be drawn into the commonality of all mankind, to be moved by music closest in its phrases and sentences to the human voice. Its motive force too is living breath: it too needs to pause and breath before it can go on." (176)

*From Heaven Lake* ends on an analogy between water molecules (which spread throughout the world) and the spread of private understanding between peoples which, if it pervades human communities like water molecules, might increase, by however little at
a time, and however slowly, the quantity of human understanding. This connection risks banality, but it identifies the focus of Seth's subject. It also marks him as a satirist of a relatively comfortable kind. His is not the voice of indignation, rather that of gentle comedy: imaginative sympathy with his subjects nevertheless distanced by his own travelling on. Society is his concern as an author, but among his concerns as a man in society is how far it is possible for authors to belong to the world of weddings and funerals. The 'social moron' withdraws from action into the world of books. This nostalgia leads, throughout Seth's work, to a longing for a lost home, sometimes identified with his family, but sometimes associated with an ideal of rootedness.

Returning to Nanjing has for him the flavor of a minor homecoming: his room, his friends, familiar sights.... Everyone who returns after an absence of a month to the place where he lives, knows, as he opens his mailbox, a uniquely bitter-sweet mixture of anticipation and apprehension. There was no letter from Stanford about his research, but then there were no unpaid bills either. At least his family has not forgotten him. He read their letter with a twinge of conscience. They were expecting him to be home by the 25th of August, on a flight from Hong Kong. He wrote a cryptic note, saying that he was going to try to return 'by a more interesting route.' He cannot say more, since it was an open secret that foreigners' mail is read in China. For all the enthusiasm with which he was undertaking this journey, he was conscious that he knew almost nothing about Tibet. And in one sense his purpose was not to travel in Tibet, but merely to pass through it: 'coming home,' as he wrote to his parents, 'by a more interesting route.'

In the landscape but not of the land, travelling through Tibet but not in it. Trying to get
home is not *The Odyssey*, but Seth's journey certainly contains many of the reflections on nation-as-culture, the multinational cultures, or perhaps multicultural nationality, of a country which provides a constant compare and contrast to India. Despite his personal self-questioning, there is a calm assurance about his point of view that is not marked by seeing the self as an example of a country with something to prove. There is no politics of envy. The observant writer interiorizes others so far as to bring his own sense of self into doubt, but Seth, like the actor, also exteriorizes himself into invented characters. The saeva indignation of the conservative, for whom the position of judgement is a presupposition unquestioned and unquestionable, is a long way from Seth's tentativeness, understanding and, in the end, tolerance. Everyday moral obtuseness, psychological brutality, even petty tyranny, may rise to the heights of amused disapprobation, but they fall short of reprehensible psychological or social limitation, and far below good and evil. The satire of social comedy, where things, however serious, are not life and death, is a delicate flower. In *The Golden Gate*, death comes by accident or in the nature of things (and, in both novels, the precious loss is a mother); consequentiality is subdued. The pursuit of power for its own sake is about as venal an offence as Seth considers. These are continuities which define his technique and its limitations.

The voice of the travel book is consistent with the voice of Mappings, the Writers Workshop collection, a voice which is personal and autobiographical as poets' first collections so often are. This is the weak, opening poem in Mappings, 'Panipat':

My aunts sit in the courtyard gossipping, shelling peas, while around them parrots
cackle in the neem trees. I sit with my flute near the place where the well was covered up to make a septic tank I glide from stop to stop following the scale of Lalit though it is afternoon; Its mournful meditative mood moves into a tune.

Leading me God knows where – into a universe beyond – beyond Panipat! well, I could have done worse than break my studies and come back home from Inglistan. Punjab, pandits, panir, Panipat and pan, family, music, faces, food, land, everything, drew me back, yet now to hear the koyal sing brings notes of other birds, the nightingale, the wren, the blackbird; and my heart's barometer turns down. I think of beeches, elms, and stare at the neem tree. My cousin slices a mango and offers it to me. I choose the slice with the seed and learn from the sweet taste, well-known and alien, I must be home at last. (Seth, Mappings 9-10)

Seth concludes his narrative by reflecting on Indo-Chinese relationships:

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. (Seth, From Heaven Lake 178)

He then adds:

But on a personal level, 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)