

Modes of Travel in Vikram Seth's *From Heaven Lake: Travels through Sinkiang and Tibet*: A Study in Cultural Geography

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Abstract

This paper argues that Vikram Seth's *From Heaven Lake: Travels through Sinkiang and Tibet* (1983) employs varied modes of travel as a narrative strategy to critically examine culture, identity, and postcolonial experience in China. By tracing Seth's journey from Turfan to his final destination in Delhi, the study demonstrates how each mode of travel—walking, bus, truck, train, tractor, and air—offers a distinct perspective on the social practices and everyday lives of the Chinese people. Presented in a chronological structure, the travel narrative foregrounds Seth's encounters with diverse communities such as Hans, Uighurs, Muslims, Buddhists, officials, and shopkeepers, while consistently emphasizing the presence of the working class. The paper further contends that these encounters facilitate cultural comparisons between India and China, highlighting

shared practices and postcolonial identities shaped by history and power relations (Pratt, 1992). Additionally, the study examines Seth's observations on the lasting effects of the Cultural Revolution, particularly its impact on cultural heritage and the lives of ordinary people (Dirlik, 1996). Drawing on travel writing theory and postcolonial criticism, this paper suggests that Seth's reliance on unconventional modes of travel enables a deeper engagement with local cultures and challenges dominant representations of China. Eventually, the study positions *From Heaven Lake: Travels through Sinkiang and Tibet* as a significant postcolonial travel text that reveals the intersections of movement, culture, and political history.

Keywords

(Travel writing, Hans, Uighurs, Post-Colonial Identity, Culture, Cultural Text, China)

Introduction to the Travel Text and Its Purpose

Travel writing has long functioned as a literary space where movement intersects with culture, identity, and power. In postcolonial contexts, travel narratives often move beyond description to interrogate the historical and political conditions that shape encounters between the traveler and the travelled space. Vikram Seth's *From Heaven Lake: Travels through Sinkiang and Tibet* (1983) emerges as a significant contribution to this tradition, documenting a journey across China and Tibet at a moment marked by political transition and cultural redefinition. Rather than presenting travel as a linear act of

observation, Seth's narrative foregrounds the means of travel itself as central to understanding society.

Seth undertakes his journey using multiple modes of transportation—walking, buses, trucks, trains, tractors, and air travel—each of which structures his access to people and places differently. These modes determine the depth of interaction, the nature of observation, and the kind of knowledge produced. Walking, in particular, allows Seth to engage directly with local communities, enabling encounters that would remain inaccessible through faster or more privileged forms of movement. As scholars of travel writing argue, such moments of proximity transform travel narratives into “contact zones” where cultures meet, clash, and negotiate meaning (Pratt, 1992).

The narrative also operates within a postcolonial framework of comparison, as Seth repeatedly negotiates the concepts of “home” and “nation.” His Indian identity shapes how he perceives Chinese society, allowing for parallels between the two cultures while also acknowledging differences. These comparisons challenge rigid national boundaries and reveal shared postcolonial experiences rooted in colonial histories, political upheavals, and everyday survival. Seth's encounters with diverse communities—Hans, Uighurs, Muslims, Buddhists, officials, and shopkeepers—highlight the plurality of Chinese society, while the recurring presence of working-class individuals foregrounds voices often marginalized in official histories.

Moreover, *From Heaven Lake* records the lingering impact of the Cultural Revolution, particularly its effects on cultural institutions, religious practices, and interpersonal relationships. Seth's

observations resonate with critical accounts of the period that emphasize cultural loss, social fragmentation, and the reconfiguration of authority (Dirlik, 1996). By embedding these insights within lived experiences rather than abstract political commentary, the text offers a grounded critique of ideological transformation.

This paper, therefore, examines how modes of travel in *From Heaven Lake* function as narrative and analytical devices that shape Seth's cultural understanding. By situating the text within travel writing theory and postcolonial discourse, the study aims to demonstrate how mobility, encounter, and observation collectively construct a nuanced portrayal of Chinese society during a critical historical moment.

From Heaven Lake: Travel through Sinkiang and Tibet (1983) provides us with an account of what Seth has seen, as he travelled through various parts of the People's Republic of China as a student. Seth has written this book in the year 1983 to give us a glimpse of the culture of China by travelling across all the parts of China using various modes of travelling. This work accounts for a lot of experiences and documents his various encounters with the Chinese people and their lifestyle. This work is a reflection of the journal that he kept and the photographs that he took while he was travelling. He was surrounded by the working class throughout his journey. Seth uses his introduction as :

“I am an Indian, and lived in China as a student. . .

I returned home to Delhi via Tibet and Nepal” (Seth, 1983)

Analysis of the Chapter

He uses India and home interchangeably, his narrative interrogates the same and layers them with multiple nuances. For Seth, nationality and the notion of familiarity are hardly coterminous. However, the case becomes problematic when the shift across national boundaries represents a shift in socio-cultural ethos. Seth's repetitive use of the word home, throughout the text in context to his experiences in varied nation-states, brings to light the dissonance between nation and home.

Modes of Travel and Cultural Exchange

Every mode of travelling shows a glimpse of the culture. The mode of travelling that Seth undertook gives an exposure to the culture of every place wherever he has visited. There is a similarity between both the Chinese and the Indian communities. Both communities are fond of songs. This travel text shows many cultural relationships and exchanges and shows many comparisons. The cultural relationships and exchanges are similar, highlighting the concept of post-colonial attitude. In the post-colonial world, Indians too gaze and stare at foreigners, through this act of staring Seth tries to bring a similarity between both communities. It is by walking that Seth has witnessed a cultural link between his 'homeland' India and the 'host land' China. Here Seth has witnessed that it is music that links both the dissimilar cultures.

Walking as a Method of Cultural Immersion

Every mode of travelling determines whatever Seth witnesses. The mode of travelling plays an important role in travelling. Each mode of

travelling is different from one other. With every mode, we get to know about the beauty of the place wherever the writer travels, and we even get to know about the cultures that are prevalent in that particular place. Throughout the journey, the various modes taken were the bus, walking, truck, tractor and air. Moreover, in the course of the journey the differences between the culture of 'homeland' and 'host land' is seen clearly. Travelling by bus, train, truck, tractor and air gives him just a little glimpse of the people and cultures of China. However, by walking across China he gets many instances about China, the behaviour of the local Chinese people towards foreigners, and the impact of the Cultural Revolution on the lives of the common people. It can be said that it is only through walking that Seth was able to collect information by interacting with and observing the local people. It would not have made it possible if he had travelled via private car. Because it is by walking he can connect to the people more than while travelling with the different modes.

Communication Barriers in a Postcolonial Context

Seth then started walking on the streets. It is by walking on the streets he shares some vital information about his 'host land' China and the attitude and behaviour of the Chinese people towards foreigners. He narrates his experiences when he went to purchase a crude wooden pipe from a Uighur woman. He misunderstood the wooden pipe as a perfect gift for a smoking friend, however through many difficulties, he discovered that it is not meant for smoking rather it is an instrument which is used to help babies to urinate. The difficulties that the writer faced in interacting with the native people suggest the problem that

every person in the post-colonial world faces. People in the post-colonial world tend to face problems while interacting with the native people of that place because they cannot interact and make them understand their issues.

Ethnic Diversity and the Othering of Foreigners

In the course of the journey, a difference between the culture of Uighurs and Hans is seen. He has observed everything very well the differences between their type of living, even their pattern of homes differ from each other. The culture of treating foreigners as valuable pandas is additionally prevalent in China. The author gives us this instance where the officialdom treats foreigners as a panda. The officialdom feels disturbed by the contact between the Chinese and also the non-Chinese. The Chinese yell “Waigouren ! Waigouren!” or “Waibin ! Waibin” when they catch sight of the foreigners. He even mentions that there's no sense of xenophobia among the Chinese people. Within the course of the journey, a difference in the food habits of his companions is seen. This difference in food habits would not be noticed if he was not travelling by bus.

Walking as a Lens into Religion and Tibetan Society

Walking as a mode of travelling provides us with a perfect glimpse of Chinese society. It truly depicts Chinese society with its positive as well as negative sides. By walking he encountered many instances of the prevalent religion in Lhasa, and he even got to know about the historical description of the famous temple in Lhasa. He discovered that a king introduced Buddhism in Tibet while conversing with a

young man. He even gets some information about the Jokhang Temple. He walks over to Norbulingka Park, Lhasa where he got to know about the Tibetan King Songtsan Gambo who built the temple in the middle of the seventh century. In the course of his journey, he gets to know about the history of Tibetan Buddhism and how the changes in spiritual leadership are shifted from one leader to another. The people earn their living by selling off religious kinds of stuff on the streets.

Diaspora, Alienation, and Nostalgia for Homeland

The postcolonial writers are manifested in the trauma of alienation and exile, the issues of self and others, and the nostalgia for home. The diasporic characteristics of longing for "homeland" is seen clearly when he reaches Nepal. It is found that Seth when with all the intensity reaches Nepal by walking. He witnessed the scenic beauty of Nepal, where he talks about the landscapes that were similar to the Indian landscape like terraced fields of rice, banana trees, flame-of-the-forest and even the indigo-coloured wrapping of a matchbox that evokes his longing for home sentiments.

Train Journey and Cross-Cultural Interactions

The mode of travelling shows a different view of society. It highlights various prospects. A journey by train gives us other ways to look at Chinese society. He reached Xian from Turfan by train. The writer is nostalgic because he remembers Delhi when he arrives at Xian. He has a conversation with his co-passenger about politics, art, and food. They even discuss the Sino-Indian relationship.

Homeland and Host Land: Continuous Comparison

The comparison between the "homeland" and the "host land " can be seen throughout the novel. The writer compares the scenic beauty of various places that he has explored. He draws a comparison between the monuments of China with the Indian monuments. Here he compares the train service of China with the train service of India. He boards the train from Liuyuan, as it is his final destination by train. His companions are from different fields. Every journey shows various aspects of the culture of China. It is to be slight when someone refuses cigarettes from the native people.

Food Habits as Markers of Cultural Identity

The food habits of Chinese people are different and vary from one particular region to another. There is a difference in food items of various communities. It is through food habits we can learn about a different culture. As the writer started his journey by truck, his friend Sui accompanied him. Sui informs him about the heavy rainfall and the condition of the road. They even discuss the available fruits, vegetables and animals in Dunhuang. They even discuss the ways of earning income in that area. They share a difference in food habits between the Han or Muslims and the rest of the people of China. They say that people all over China eat pork and dogs. However, the Han or the Muslims do not have pork or dogs.

Exile, Homeland, and the Figure of the Dalai Lama

During his truck journey, he interacts with his companion. His companion asked him about the Dalai Lama when they heard that he

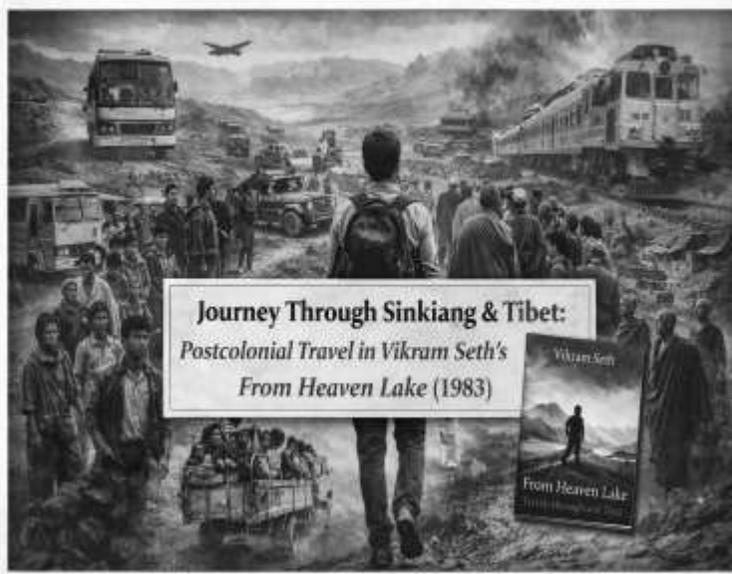
was from India. He gets information that the Dalai Lama is in exile from his own 'homeland' Tibet; he lives in his 'host land' India. The Tibetans eagerly wait for his return. One of his companions points toward his old parents, sitting on the spare tire in the back of the truck, that they are determined not to die until they have seen the Dalai Lama. They say that the Government is planning to bring him back. However, they say that the former leader may not return to his home as he will not be able to vest his secular power.

Completion of the Journey and Reflection on Indo-Chinese Relations

The writer reaches Delhi by air from Kathmandu after a lot of struggle. He then thinks of the journey that he undertook. He even tells that if both India and China were amicable towards each other then half of the world would have been at peace. However, he even says that though they are a part of the same landmass they are so different in their thinking. While he was at the airport he recollected all the routes that he took to reach his final destination Delhi. He even recollects the people that he has met on his journey. He remembers all the knowledge that he has learnt from observing the people and their culture.

Impact of the Cultural Revolution on Chinese Society

The Cultural Revolution hurts the people. The Cultural Revolution encouraged them to turn against their parents and teachers and everyone in the authority. All decency died during that time, cultural heritage of China, books, temples, and work of art was destroyed. People now care for only themselves.



(OpenAI, 2026)

Implications of the Study

The present study carries significant implications for the fields of travel writing, postcolonial studies, and comparative cultural analysis. By examining Vikram Seth's *From Heaven Lake: Travels through Sinkiang and Tibet* (1983) through the lens of mobility and narrative strategy, the research redefines travel not merely as physical movement but as an epistemological framework through which culture, identity, and power relations are interpreted. It underscores how modes of transportation function as methodological tools that determine access, proximity, and depth of cultural engagement. In doing so, the study broadens the understanding of travel writing as an

analytical genre capable of producing nuanced socio-political commentary.

One key implication lies in repositioning travel writing within postcolonial discourse. The analysis demonstrates that Seth's journey destabilizes conventional binaries of East and West by presenting an Indian traveler observing China—another postcolonial nation. This shift challenges Eurocentric models of travel literature and foregrounds South–South cultural encounters. The study thus contributes to expanding the scope of postcolonial inquiry by highlighting shared historical experiences, ideological transformations, and cultural negotiations between formerly colonized societies. It encourages scholars to explore alternative trajectories of travel that move beyond colonial center–periphery frameworks.

The research also emphasizes the importance of mobility as a determinant of representation. By illustrating how walking enables intimate engagement while mechanized travel produces distanced observation, the study suggests that narrative perspective is inseparable from physical movement. This insight has broader methodological implications for literary criticism, as it invites scholars to consider how spatial dynamics and embodied experiences shape textual meaning. Travel, therefore, emerges not only as a thematic concern but also as a structural and interpretive principle.

Furthermore, the study highlights the role of everyday encounters in constructing cultural knowledge. Seth's interactions with working-class individuals, ethnic minorities, and local officials reveal the layered complexity of Chinese society beyond official narratives. This

approach foregrounds marginalized voices and everyday practices, thereby reinforcing the value of micro-historical observation in literary texts. The implication here is that travel narratives can serve as cultural archives that document lived experiences often absent from political historiography.

Another important implication concerns the conceptual tension between “home” and “nation.” The study demonstrates how Seth’s repeated invocation of home reflects diasporic consciousness and unsettles rigid national identities. This contributes to ongoing debates in postcolonial theory regarding belonging, exile, and transnational subjectivity. By examining how the traveler negotiates emotional and cultural affiliations across borders, the research deepens our understanding of identity as fluid and relational rather than territorially fixed.

The study also sheds light on the literary representation of political trauma, particularly the Cultural Revolution. By situating Seth’s observations within broader theoretical discussions of ideological transformation, the research illustrates how travel writing can document the aftereffects of political upheaval in subtle, experiential ways. This has implications for interdisciplinary scholarship, as it positions literary texts as valuable sources for cultural and historical reflection.

Finally, the research calls for a reassessment of development, nationalism, and cross-cultural understanding in contemporary global contexts. Seth’s reflections on Indo-Chinese relations and his emphasis on shared humanity suggest the possibility of dialogue

across political boundaries. The study therefore encourages future research to examine travel narratives as sites of ethical engagement, where empathy and comparison foster intercultural awareness.

In sum, this study contributes to literary scholarship by demonstrating that *From Heaven Lake* operates at the intersection of movement, culture, and political history. Its implications extend beyond the specific text, offering a framework for analyzing travel literature as a dynamic space where mobility generates critical insight into postcolonial identities and cultural transformation.

Conclusion: Travel Writing as Cultural Critique

Vikram Seth's *From Heaven Lake: Travels through Sinkiang and Tibet* ultimately emerges as far more than a record of geographical movement; it becomes a profound meditation on culture, identity, and historical transition. Through varied modes of travel—walking, bus, truck, train, tractor, and air—Seth transforms mobility into a narrative and analytical tool, demonstrating how movement shapes perception, access, and understanding. Each mode of transport frames a different encounter, but it is walking in particular that allows him to engage intimately with local communities, observe everyday lives, and witness the subtle textures of Chinese society beyond official representations.

The narrative's strength lies in its sustained negotiation between "home" and "host land." By repeatedly invoking India while traversing China and Tibet, Seth unsettles rigid notions of nationality and belonging, revealing identity as fluid and relational. His encounters

with Hans, Uighurs, Muslims, Buddhists, officials, and working-class individuals foreground the plurality of Chinese society, while his reflections on food, language, religion, and music create meaningful parallels between India and China. In doing so, the text challenges binary oppositions of East and West and instead offers a South–South comparative perspective rooted in shared postcolonial histories.

Equally significant is Seth’s attentive documentation of the Cultural Revolution’s lingering scars—its destruction of cultural heritage, its disruption of spiritual institutions, and its impact on ordinary lives. Rather than presenting abstract political commentary, he embeds these realities within lived experiences, thereby humanizing history. His observations reveal how political upheaval reshapes memory, authority, and everyday survival, turning travel writing into a subtle yet powerful form of cultural critique.

Thus, *From Heaven Lake* stands as an important postcolonial travel text that situates movement at the heart of cultural inquiry. It demonstrates that travel writing can function as a site of ethical engagement—where comparison fosters empathy, where observation challenges dominant narratives, and where mobility becomes a means of reimagining identity and history. In tracing Seth’s journey from Turfan to Delhi, we come to understand that travel is not merely a crossing of borders, but an ongoing dialogue between cultures, memories, and selves.

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