

Contextualising Diasporic Identity In Vikram Seth's Mappings

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Abstract

This paper explores how Vikram Seth's diasporic identity and its features are highlighted throughout the collection, *Mappings*. *Mappings* writes in an autobiographical voice, and many of his poems employ the first-person narrative style. The author's experiences and emotions are clearly expressed in the collection. In many of his poetry, alienation and nostalgia are the main topics. This collection of his poetry highlights his ideas and sentiments around family and the conflicts between the events of the past and the present. The collection's opening poetry, written by Seth himself, is likewise autobiographical and centres on the psychological and cultural struggle that separates his native India from the United States, where he has been residing for many years. Despite his classical training, he writes in a modern style that incorporates free-verse, personal accounts of immigration and movement, and other similar modern elements.

Keywords: Identity, Experiences, Migration, Diaspora.

Introduction

Contextualising Diasporic Identity in Vikram Seth's *Mappings*

Vikram Seth is among the most influential and unique poets from the Indian diaspora. He is one of the best poets of his generation because of his eclecticism. His wide intellectual breadth sets him apart from his peers. He is a cosmopolitan poet from the diaspora whose hybrid character allows him to draw inspiration from a wide range of sources. His very allusive poetry demonstrates his versatility as a scholar. His poetry reveals a fresh meaning and idea with each reading. He is a global writer who lived on three continents and wrote a vast array of creative works. As a result, he is a global writer whose writings are set in several nations. Being a master of his craft, he can write well-crafted poetry just as easily as a children's book, libretto, travelogue, or fiction. Despite writing in standard English for international audiences, he is a multilingual polyglot who can converse in a wide range of languages. He sees everyone on the planet as his characters,

regardless of their race, nationality, or origin. He writes whatever the muse takes him, therefore his themes are not limited to those of cultural displacement, the quest for roots, or diasporic dislocations.

All diasporic and postcolonial texts are based on autobiographical themes and nostalgia. Seth is an Indian writer living abroad who belongs to the post-1980s group of poets. He is a postmodern novelist and poet who has created a wide range of works since 1980. Throughout his poetry book, he has played about with the conventional poetry form, yet the subjects are wholly diasporic. Mappings demonstrates his passion for rhyme and metre. Love, grief, relationships, family, failures, and his intense interest in conventional forms and rhymes are all depicted in this collection.

"Panipat" is the first poem in the collection, Mappings. The poem describes a domestic scene in the first person using a first-person storytelling approach in a modern environment. In the opening quatrain, he refers to his aunts, who are talking and shelling peas as a parrot-clucks in the neem trees. The author describes an environment that is typical of India from the very first stanza:

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

The poet describes himself as seated in a different realm, his flute sliding from one stop to another on the scales of Lalit, an Indian classical music style that is calm and devout. Taking a vacation from his studies, he is at home. He was drawn home by the land, the faces, the music, the family, and the food. Indian terminology like pandits, paneer, and pan contribute to his avant-garde writing style. The lines "Punjab, pandits, panir, / Panipat and pan" (2) have alliteration. Then, he is observed connecting the koel's song to western birds such as the blackbird, wren, and nightingale. He is thinking about the elms while he stares at the neem. Here, a contradictory sense of nostalgia is apparent. He is expressing his longing for both India and England at the same time. When his cousin offers him a slice of mango later in the poem, he selects the one containing the seed. The poet gets sentimental when tasting the luscious fruit and decides he should remain at home. The slice containing the seed signifies his preference for India over a foreign location. The poem has the rhyme system abcb and is composed of brief quatrains. He feels both at home and alienated in his own country when Hindi phrases are used in an English poetry. so embodying his multicultural and diasporic identity.

The collection's second poetry, "Departure Lounge," is about a father-son bond. This lengthy autobiographical poem captures the poet's sentimental thoughts as he sketches a scene of himself and his father at an airport. A father and son

are present at the Departure Lounge of the Boston Airport. The son was about to leave and would not return for years. The poet talks about an early memory of being thrashed and reprimanded by his father for giving a 50 paise coin to a rag maid. He claims he will never be able to forget that day. He describes how, at the age of sixteen, he accepted his beatings and reprimands as “unneeded cruelty” in the following stanzas. But he also remembers a few instances of his father’s generosity. He declares his general disdain for his unhappy early years before declaring his affection for his father. “You gave us food and comforts, were obsessed / With ‘Nothing but the best / Will do for my kids,’” he says in thanksgiving. (7).

The father’s biography is then covered in the tale. The poet describes a scene from his father’s early years. At the age of fifteen, the father fled from his “Baoji,” having become an orphan at the age of two. His father had provided his family with refuge and screened his sufferings from them. A brief account of his father’s survival of the rain while he was gone from home is then given. The poet claims that despite hiding your affection, you wept over “Baoji’s” passing.

Once more, the poet describes how his eyes have opened to reality after previously being unable to comprehend his father. Then, with a hint of nostalgia, he describes their time together and the memories they had made at home with the family.

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- (8-9)

For a diasporic writer, memory is crucial to their life. It is a crucial tool for a writer who is living abroad. He can use it to bring the past back to life in his creations. To quote Salman Rushdie here:

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. (“Imaginary Homelands,” 215)

Sports and illnesses can educate us to tolerate suffering, but they cannot impart happiness. He then implies that he has moved on from the conflict, criticism, and affection of his parents and has moved on with his life. He does, however, express his gratitude for his father’s affection and

guidance by saying, "I'll miss you." "Knowing that I couldn't now, even if I could have had a better father a year ago" (10).

Twenty-three women make up "Departure Lounge." A couplet written in half or nearly rhymes end each verse. The rhyming system is structured as follows: abcbdd. The poem employs enjambment along with a few punctuation symbols, including semicolons, colons, dashes, and question marks. This poem, which is one of the most well-known in the collection, is full of autobiographical and nostalgic aspects.

The subject of Seth's upcoming poem is Indian history. As the title implies, "From the Memoirs of Babur, First Moghul Emperor of Hindustan" is a poem that is derived from Zahirruddin Muhammad Babur's book "Baburnama." It is an autobiographical novel that chronicles Babur's journey - he rose to the position of emperor at the age of twelve - and covers the growth of his kingdom and his reign throughout India. The poem tells the story of an army led by Emperor Babur travelling across a cold landscape. It illustrates the fortitude and tenacity needed to be able to dominate and reign. It also draws attention to the military conflicts of that era. The poem opens with a description of the bitterly chilly conditions. They are disoriented and it is snowing heavily. They had to carry on, even though all that is around them are hills and snow. "Breath-deep" snow is present. One of their guys died in route because he was unable to withstand the bone-chilling cold.

Babur's personality is also revealed in this poem; he helped his soldiers push down the snow and allowed them to remain on their horses regardless of their rank. His religious side also emerges when he prepares to offer prayers in such inclement weather. Babur and his troops moved three kilometres further and found refuge in a cave. It's said that this evening was so ferocious that it might have killed them. Babur remained near the cave's entrance as it felt little at first, showing his concern for his soldiers once more. The Emperor walked inside at midnight after being informed that the cave could accommodate them all:

When almost at midnight
A survey party discovered
The cave could hold us all
I shook the snow from my head
And entered... (24)

There is finally a sigh of relief after enduring such severe and frigid weather: "From the inhuman cold / into the warmth of the cave / Where all at length were safe" (24).

Eight quatrains, written in free verse, make up the poem. This poem's wide use of poetic elements is what gives it its poetic character. Words have been used freely again to create calming imagery. The poet uses the word "snowed" twice in the final line of the first stanza to emphasise the harshness of the weather. He also uses alliteration in the line

“hill on hill and that was all” (23) to describe the remote setting. Finally, the personification in the final stanza – “inhuman cold” and “warmth of the cave” - highlights Seth’s poetic genius. In addition to shedding light on the brutal reality of the wartime travels, the poem provides us with personal details about Babur. The poem uses the war’s hardships as a backdrop to show the humanitarian side of a great conqueror.

Another well-known poem in this collection, “Close of Play,” combines several subjects into a single verse. The poem is lengthy and emphasises themes of social reality, ruin, and the melancholy that permeates the present society. The poem has a melancholic tone and is written in free verse. The poet addresses us as the final generation at the beginning of the poem. When he refers to artists such as Surdas, Bach, Rembrandt, and Du Fu, the allusion is evident. These are the great ancient writers whose writings are being cited as literary models by modern and upcoming writers. He refers to their deeds and lives as a history that will never be repeated. According to him, cities like Beijing, Boston, Rome, and Madras will expand, but humans and machines won’t make it. He claims we are on the verge of total annihilation. Without distinction, all groups including the young, the black and brown, the rich and the peasants, will perish. Not even the whales and dolphins will make it out alive. The seaweed is the only thing that could make it. The poem “The Lotus-Eaters” by the renowned poet Alfred Tennyson is then alluded to in “The roof and crown of things” (40). This poem, like “The Lotus-Eater,” discusses uncertainty and devastation. The poet makes observations about how life is completely broken.

The poet says in the second stanza that although human life will not be missed, Earth will continue to move through the cosmos among the stars. The prolific composer of the Classical era, Mozart, is then brought up by him. He claims that the only vibrations on Earth that an extraterrestrial intelligence could possibly detect would be those of Mozart. As the far-off planet examined our artefacts and skeletons, it became inquisitive about our accomplishments. The poet imagines in a creative way that when the information of our annihilation reaches the other planet, it might be sensed by them along with our homes, highways, and The Great Wall of China, along with our arts and works, passion, and wisdom. The destructive character of everything around us is discussed in the next stanza. The games we used to play will grow deadly and autonomous. The poet predicts that people will discover these facts much later. The positive will not last. The viruses will propagate and cause mutation in the next generation, and we will all be doomed:

Our playthings, grown autonomous,
knowledge and use,
This practical, that ideal Good at last
Rear doomtoys that will undo nine-tenths of us

Leaving the breathing dead, we call survivors
On a radiant waste. Viruses perhaps
May breed despite a thousand shocks. We will
not

Once so mutated see a new child. (41)

He continues by explaining how anger and pride will also vanish. He says that, as in previous eras, a meeting of roughly fifty nations would be called to control the situation. The Fifty Nations Meeting, which was convened in 1945 to draft a charter protecting future generations from the devastation of war, is referenced in this passage. Then he says that the devastation and altered conditions will be beyond the ability of even poisonous individuals like Adolf Hitler to respond.

The poet laments the treachery of a once affluent and happy existence in the final verse of his poem "Close of Play." There is a lesson for the younger generation in this stanza. Before it is too late, the poet urges them to realise the importance of life. Before this Earth goes extinct like other planets, he wants everyone to enjoy life to the fullest.

"A Morning Walk" is another famous poem that explores the theme of identity exploration, alienation, and exile. There are four octaves in the poem. This theatrical monologue follows the rhyme scheme aabbccdd eeffgghh iijjkkll mmnnnoopp and is written in near rhyme and eye rhyme. The poem has a tone that is somewhat gloomy.

The first line of the poem describes a spider that is ensnared in its web. While out for his morning stroll, the poet discovers it. The spider may be waiting for guests, he says. He refers to himself as a guest, not a fly nor a Californian. For the spider, the poet sees himself as an outsider. He claims that in terms of their outward looks, neither is familiar with the other. For the Californian spider, he is a foreigner, and the poet believes that the spider is also extremely different from the Indian spiders. "...bloated, yellow, with some / Sepia blotches not like those at home," (69) is how he characterises the spider. "Our spiders are much blacker and much thinner, / Patrol their webs with greater frequency / And seem perpetually anxious about dinner," (69) he continues, describing the Indian spiders. Abruptly, the renowned Indian author Suryakant Tripathi "Nirala" and his poem "Bhikshuk," which depicts the suffering, starvation, and misfortune of beggars, cross his mind.

The realities of the impoverished in India, the malnourished children, and their white-eyed stares are discussed in the fourth and fifth stanzas. The poet claims to be far from his house and the agony he once experienced when meandering around the streets of Calcutta. He is not in the presence of children who are begging. He claims to be lost in thought as he strolls through the wealthy trees, wondering how much is fair to share their world but not their suffering. He speaks of the starving children's situation in a gloomy manner, saying, "Their children's limbs will atrophy, brain rot / Swollen

for lack of it" (70). He acknowledges that being overseas has prevented him from seeing his native country and expresses his displeasure about them. He sees himself as trapped in the alien world's web. He claims that his enjoyment has rendered him oblivious to life's realities. "A clod is washed away; the world is less; / But why disturb my quest for happiness?" he asks himself. (70). He has a great compassion for those who are denied their basic wants and happiness. He discovers that nobody can assist them. For these unfortunate people, there is no justice. He concludes the final verse by contrasting his life with that of the other poor souls. He claims that because he writes poems and eats his meals on time, he discovers that his breath is non-consumptive. He does not welcome death or go without food because he is content with his life. He draws comparisons between his existence and that of those who are averse to dying, lead tranquil lives, and have no respite from "desire" and "grief." The entire poem reflects an immigrant's experience. Indian-born expatriate, Uma Parameshwaran describes this situation as follows:

The first is one of nostalgia for the homeland left behind mingled with fear in a strange land. The second is a phase in which one is busy adjusting to the new environment that there is little creative output. The third phase is the shaping of diaspora existence by involving themselves in ethno cultural issues. The fourth is when they have 'arrived' and start participating in the larger world of politics and national issues. (3)

The collection's title poem, "Mappings," is among its most well-known. The theme of the poem is self-realization and self-revelation. The poem emphasises the identity of the poet and his personal growth. The word "Mappings" refers to the connections that memories have within the brain, which is a memory reservoir. It is a composition consisting of five nearly rhymed octets. The location is a UK lakefront pier and beach. It's sunset now; the windsurfers are gone. The poet sits with his manuscript, wine, and loquats. The wind dies and the seabirds pause before falling. The weed-filled waterway is being manoeuvred by the wild ducks.

Sharp imagery is used to enhance the first stanza. When the sun sets, the hill becomes blue. The sentences he once wrote here are read by the poet, who finds them sour now. He says in the following verse that he composed these lines when he was younger and that he wants to impart to his younger self the capacity to endure and overcome the anguish of love. He wishes to impart to his younger self the ability of the heart to heal. He refers to the anguish of love as "the limb-

trapped hurt of love" (60) to give it meaning. He goes on to say that we will only be able to truly look for happiness and knowledge if we give up our incomparably powerful urge to discover the location of cells. A comparison is made between the poet and the mockingbird in the third stanza. Five distinct birds can be impersonated by a mockingbird.

The poet is multilingual as well. Then he learns that what he wrote when he was younger reflected his own sense of significance and self-worth at the time rather than his younger counterpart. He discovers that all his self-mapped states - whether they be humorous, melancholic, serene, or agitated - belong to him and are inherent to him. All his recollections are authentically alive. The way he presents himself as a mature soul is summed up in the final stanza. Everything he was and is now more cohesive because of his swim in the lake's refreshing water. He likens his new persona to the union of a massive, brilliant star and a wanderer. Like this continuous star that is within him, so is his poetry. He describes himself as flawless.

Throughout *Mappings*, Seth's diasporic identity and its characteristics are emphasised. Numerous poems convey the poet's experiences of loss, nostalgia, alienation, exile, and other related subjects. He has applied and experienced multiculturalism, hybridity, and the quest for identity in his work as an expatriate writer; his autobiographical element is important to his diasporic writings. Numerous poems also convey feelings of fear and anxiety, as well as a profound sense of isolation and loneliness. Many poems express both the anguish of migration and the pursuit of self-realization. Many of the works of diasporic literature are based on the realisation and growth of the expatriate's spirit. Any factor that leads to a person being uprooted or separated from their native country causes them to suffer, and migration is never without its negative consequences. The diasporic writers find some solace in writing about their suffering, but their nostalgia for their own place and their past haunts them. The diasporic community is always overcome with a sense of isolation.

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