

Complexities Of Diasporic Life In Vikram Seth's *All You Who Sleep Tonight*

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Abstract

This paper attempts to examine the complexities of diasporic life from the select poems of Vikram Seth's third major collection of poetry *All You Who Sleep Tonight* (1990). His empathy for others and his own feelings are explored in a few chosen poems. These poems, which are autobiographical in style, cover a wide range of topics, including loneliness, longing, and his attempts to make a name for himself abroad. The titles depict his time there as well as his travels to China, India, and the United States. Even though the themes are mostly diasporic, there is a clear play with the traditional and classical styles of poetry. He is a lyrical poet who draws influence from many different places. Seth understands the loneliness that some people feel and wants them to know that they are not going through life alone. He values empathy, compassion, and love. He wants the readers to understand the importance of love and to have empathy.

Keywords: Diasporic, Experience, Complexity, Loneliness, Life

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Vikram Seth is one of the most influential poets of the Indian diaspora. Because he has lived and travelled over the world, his poetry captures the unique characteristics of many locales. He is a global citizen who travels across cultures. In whatever nation he travels to or stays in, he feels at home. His poetry emphasises several aspects of post-modern poetry while expressing his humanistic viewpoints, ecological concerns, transnational identity, and cosmopolitanism. His poetry explores and talks about India, its history, legacy, colonial past, and a sense of attachment because he is an Indian living abroad. His body of work includes poems from a variety of geographical areas, poetic genres, and themes that are wildly varied.

The experiences and emotions of a writer from the diaspora are highlighted throughout the poems of *All You Who Sleep Tonight*. It is an account of the poet's wandering life. It includes poetry from many nations and locales. The poet's attention to detail is evident in the minute details he gives us. He enjoys seeing different cultures and taking trips all around the world. The deplorable circumstances faced by women in German-occupied Lithuania during the Holocaust are detailed in Seth's poem, "Lithuania: Questions and Answers." The ladies who were taken prisoner were subjected to violent rape after the German soldiers used to brand their bodies with the words "Whore for Hitler's troops" (16). The poem opens with a scene in court where a Rabbi named Ephraim Oshry is being presented with a case involving rape. In Jewish tradition, a rabbi is a spiritual guide or instructor. Among the few Rabbis to survive the Holocaust was Oshry. In Kovno, a lady from a respectable family was being sexually assaulted and had been marked with the phrase "Whore for Hitler's troops" (16). Her spouse, who she recently found, is horrified to find those words on her arm. The spouse is curious as to whether he is allowed to have her. Moreover, he casts doubt on her allegiance by asking, "Was there consent in this?" (16). The woman is pleading for forgiveness. The case is explained, and the subsequent verse provides a description of it: This took place in the city, not the field.

Nor did she cry out, therefore we may assume

That she consented. But Maimonides

Has said a sword above the head spells force. (16)

It was therefore determined that she was coerced. The final verse emphasises that in certain situations, the victim's statements should be believed even in the absence of any proof or witnesses. The Rabbi tries to reassure the listener in the next line that God is the one who heals all grief and that He is aware of his people's predicament. In the final verse, the Rabbi issues a severe warning to those who doubt and wrongdoings, reminding them that God exists and will exact revenge for the blood of His people. The Rabbi expresses sadness over the fact that some husbands divorce such women and are unable to support them. He refers to them as repugnant animals, wolves, and woodland beasts that prey on the defenceless and the devout. A reference from "Devarim," the fifth Jewish Torah, appears at the poem's conclusion:

But think of Moses' words, the man of God:

"Sing aloud, O you nations, of His people;

For he avenges the blood of his servants, and

Renders revenge upon His adversaries." (17)

Some poets have felt impelled to write on the Holocaust's tragedies. Some, like Randall Jarrell, wrote of the atrocities they witnessed as the camps' liberators, while others composed poetry about the struggle to survive. Despite not having

personally experienced the Holocaust, poets Denise Levertov, Gerald Stern, Karl Shapiro, Louis Simpson, and others were moved to write about it (Young).

The poem "Hill Dawn" paints a stunning picture of India's hills and surrounds. The rhyme system used in its four quatrains is abab cdcd efef ghgh. To convey the breathtaking scenery, the poet conjures up images. The scene is in Uttarakhand, close to the Garhwal range. The avalanche that the poet is seeing is described. The poem is not very long, but it contains figures of speech such as onomatopoeia in the line "The blue snows flush and blanch" (29), and alliteration in the line "Sudden and swift I hear" (29) for example. We can almost feel the rush of snow from the mountain thanks to the imagery. The poem portrays the grandeur of the scenery throughout. The mist is rising as night is drawing near. Oak, rhododendron, pine, and cedar trees can be found in the woods that encircle the hills. The snow on the trees has caused them to turn white. Hence, the trees coated in snow seem "As visionless as white" (29).

The poem "Suzhou Park" shifts its location to a Chinese park. Evening time finds the poet once more conjuring up images to convey the beauty all around him. The poem uses the rhyme pattern ababcddefef gg in an experimental Shakespearean sonnet format. The rhyme system is conventional, yet it is experimental because each line has a varied amount of syllables. Seth's poetry has a unique beauty that comes from the inclusion of nature in his writing. The first few words allude to the autumn season. The poet's words give the routine an artistic quality. This poem introduces the reader to the Chinese martial art form known as "tai-qi-quan." The poet characterises it as a "mute dance," a description that would be understandable to the average person upon witnessing the moves of this art form. We get a sense of the area from the description of the flowers, trees, and birds. His poems on Magnolia blooms and Magpies are written while he is in China. The readers are left with lovely images in their heads by the onomatopoeia and the detailed description.

The poet conveys in the final few words that it is getting late and that people are going to bed. He describes the many methods in which people sleep. The poet uses the word "resting" to describe a mental state and a calm that can be attained in a variety of ways, not only lying down. This human condition is described by the parallelism, "One writes, one thinks, one moves, one sleeps" (30).

Another poetry composed in China is "Night in Jiangning." The poem has eight lines and the rhyme scheme ABCBDEF. The poetry uses a lot of imagery. It's nighttime, and the rain is just going to start. The poet is sipping tea while taking on the breathtaking scenery. With the use of vivid language, he has created a stunning setting and infused the poem with sounds and colour. His creative skill is demonstrated by the way he describes the moon as a "Gold disc" (31) and paints a beautiful picture of the surrounding landscape. Throughout the entire poem, onomatopoeia and the creative depiction of beauty are present:

A glass of tea; the moon;
The frog croak in the weeds.
A bat wriggles down across
Gold disk to silver reeds.
The distant light of lamps. (31)

The poem's descriptions of the natural beauty evoke a sense of peace and tranquilly.

One of the well-known Chinese gardens is described in the poem "Lion Grove, Suzhou." A UNESCO World Heritage Site, that is. The poem is only eight lines long and uses the rhyme scheme ababcdcd. The maze-like Lion Grove Park is a popular tourist destination. This maze is compared to life in the poem. It illustrates how life presents a variety of difficulties, much like a maze. Intelligence and an open mind help us conquer this life's challenges. People enter this maze blindly, like toddlers, never knowing what lies ahead. Once this life philosophy is explained to us, the narration returns to the park. Seeing their kids dart into the maze causes parents to become nervous. They regain their happiness after locating their children. The poetry makes us think of our parents' affection.

This is also the case with the poem "Tourists." The poem describes the journey of a husband-and-wife pair of travellers. The rhyme system for its three octaves is aabbccdd eeffgghh ijkkll. It talks about their time spent there. The duo is seen on a tour with other tourists and a guide in the first stanza. The gang is occupied with using the "turtle stele" to take images (33). In China, turtles are revered as lucky animals. The "turtle stele" structures are seen in numerous ancient temples. The pair vacates the structure. They are worn out. The pair feels more at peace as night falls and they can finally sleep.

The couple does not speak Chinese, but it is revealed in the second line that they were visitors in China forty years ago. They were pleased living here before, but they had to leave for an unknown cause. They are back here as tourists, but this time the husband is exhausted and panting, which makes the wife nervous. They must get some sleep.

The scene changes to a building top in the third and final stanza, when the couple is seen enjoying their evening tea. As they chat about their plans for the following day while taking in the sunset, they abruptly notice something out of the ordinary. There appears to be a fire somewhere far away, causing crimson smoke and an eerie glow to form on the horizon. The view from Drum Tower is captured by the pair. This tower, located in Xian, in the Shaanxi Province of China, offers views of the entire city.

The poem "Qingdao: December" describes a Chinese city during the winter. The rhyme system for its three octaves is aabbccdd eeffgghh ijkkll. The poet's emotions and the tranquilly he finds in the arms of nature are expressed in the poem. Poetic devices like personification, metaphor, imagery, onomatopoeia, and epithets enhance the poem's attractiveness. It's nighttime and the speaker is seated on a beach. He paints a clear picture of his surroundings. The speaker feels invigorated

and at ease as the wind blows through his hair and the waves of the sea. The detailed account transports us to the scene with him. He describes in the stanza that follows how being surrounded by such beauty makes life seem meaningful. The poem makes clear the poet's care for the environment and his desire for everyone to recognise its value. He believes that gratitude towards Mother Earth and the natural world is appropriate.

The significance of the location is explained by the sentence "Here by the sea this quiet night" (34), which is repeated. The speaker continues by expressing how happy it is to be in such breathtaking natural settings. The sea and the pleasant weather let one forget their suffering. Here is a beautiful word picture:

I see the light, I breathe the scent,
I touch the insight, but a bent
Of heart exacts its old designs
And draws my hands to write these lines. (34)

The final sentence implies that the author was thinking about the meaning of life when he or she wrote this poetry. The surrounding natural beauty has aided in his artistic development.

With twenty-eight quatrains, the poem "On the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Golden Gate Bridge" is a lengthy one. The rhyme scheme of this historical poetry is abab cdcd efef ghgh. Written on the 50th anniversary of the Golden Gate Bridge, it is a narrative poem. Together with his team, Chief Engineer Joseph Strauss constructed the bridge in 1937. The poet has painted a striking picture of the bridge and the significance of Engineer Strauss's construction. The poem opens with a grey whale being thrown into the water beneath the bridge. The poet describes the Golden Gate Bridge, which spans the strait separating Marin and San Francisco, and its significance for both nations in the stanzas that follow. The poet continues by describing how Mr Joseph Strauss's strong resolve made the seemingly difficult task of building the bridge possible. This bridge's construction encountered numerous challenges. Its building had proven to be an extremely challenging endeavour, from opposition from the ferry companies to difficulties in acquiring funding. The poet describes the greatness of this Chief Engineer and how his perseverance had bestowed onto the world a wonderful gift. As though building the bridge had been the Engineer's primary responsibility, he informs us that the Engineer passed away the next year. Ellis is another engineer from the poet's team that is mentioned. The poet also explains the design of the Bridge:

Two towers hold the cable; ton
On ton of it
Hangs chainlike from the peaks, yet one
Alone is lit. (37)

The poet expresses his hope in the following two stanzas that justice will be fulfilled when all those involved in the construction receive their proper compensation. We must never overlook the brilliant mind that oversaw the building of this magnificent bridge. The sequence of happenings that this Bridge has seen is expressed in the stanzas that follow. There are many such stories, including the troops sailing out to battle, the passionate kisses, the horrible suicides, the brave rescues, and many more.

This poem highlights the respect that the public has for Engineer Strauss. The poet suggests that this sight is only visible to humans because of a powerful force. God has given humanity this celestial bridge as a gift. Mr. Joseph Strauss should live on in the memory of everybody. The poet concludes by stating that Mrs. Joseph's sad heart cannot be eased by any amount of appreciation when her husband passes away. While the rest of the world enjoys this stunning bridge as a gift from Mr. Joseph Strauss, the wife is left with only her husband's memories.

Seth's skill with images is demonstrated once more in "The Scent of Sage and Bay." This little poetry, which consists of two quatrains written in the rhyme scheme abab cdcd, demonstrates the poet's use of figurative language and the beauty of his writing. The poet has conjured up a striking picture of sitting on a hill. He paints a word picture, much like a painter:

High on the hill I sit and watch an errant jay
Set a low twig of redwood swinging.
Wild columbines are here, the scent of sage and bay,
The slanting light, a cricket singing. (41)

This section's poetry all demonstrate Seth's artistic talent. The section is filled with examples of his excellent imagery. There are various types of pictures, including tactile, olfactory, auditory, and visual ones.

"Heart" discusses the body's most talked-about organ - the heart - and its innate urge to continue. The poet's loneliness and suffering are conveyed in the poem. The rhyme scheme used for its four quatrains is aaba bcb cdc dded. The first two lines rhyme with the fourth line in each verse. The numbness that the poet experiences is introduced to us in the first stanza. He says that only he could hear the pounding of his own heart. He begins by explaining the heart in layman's terms before moving on to a more accurate and scientific explanation:

Whether my spirit soars or dives,
My blood, at its compulsion, drives
Through its elastic chambers, through
My arteries, my veins, my lives. (60)

His heart is telling him to go for life. He views it as his loyal friend who will never abandon him. The final sentence, "For what?," makes the argument clear, but it also lets him move on: "It beats, I live, it beats again" (60). I wish I had known" (60). The above line's use of a question mark and the repeated use of the word "knew" highlight how complicated human

psychology is.

“All You Who Sleep Tonight” conveys the idea that everyone has the same fate. Everybody experiences some thrills and tragedies throughout their lifetime. It is composed of two quatrains with the rhyme pattern abab cdcd. This little poem focuses on the emotions of the diasporic population specifically. The anguish and loneliness of the diasporic world are portrayed in the first stanza. With these lyrics, the poet links all those who are lonely:

All you who sleep tonight Far from the ones you love,
No hand to left or right,
And emptiness above- (62)

The poet counsels everyone not to feel alone in the second and last stanzas. No one is alone in this world, he claims. If one is separated from their loved ones, they shouldn't give up on life. The poet encourages everyone to embrace both the joy and the suffering that life has to offer. He wants the readers to feel the same sorrow and isolation that individuals experience globally. Declaring, “Know that you aren't alone / The whole world shares your tears,” (62) he gives the world advice on how to be compassionate and understanding of the pain of others.

All You Who Sleep Tonight examines the complex emotions and empathy that exist in relationships. It discusses all other types of relationships as well, including those in which members of other communities, groups, or nations are tied to one another, in addition to human relationships. The foundation of writing for writers from diverse backgrounds is empathy and emotions. The sympathetic aspect of a diasporic poet is demonstrated by their capacity to experience, write about, and give voice to the pain of others. The poet's humanistic perspective is emphasised in the book. As an experimental poet, Seth employs a range of stylistic methods in his poems, including imagery, ellipses, parallelism, symbolism, and intertextuality, to enhance his work and give it a distinct identity. He believes in poetry that is pure and is a poet of the highest calibre. He stands out from his peers thanks to the way he writes.

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