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Emotions In The Poetry of Vikram Seth

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Abstract

Emotions are the essential elements of Poetry and Literature. Almost all Poetry is based on one or the other emotion. Even poets like Eliot, who think that “Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality”, are not devoid of emotions when writing their own poetry. This paper is an attempt to discover various emotions in the poetry of Vikram Seth. *Mappings, All You Who Sleep Tonight, and The Humble Administrator’s Garden* are the three anthologies that have been studied to discover various emotions shown by the poet.

Seth is one of the most versatile writers of the present age. **The Times** hailed him as “The best writer of his generation.”ⁱ His poems are highly subjective which accounts for their individuality. Seth is not only influenced by the modern poets but also by the social, cultural, political and personal events that took place in the last century. The Existential motif has become common to most of the modern writers and Seth is no exception. The novelty of his poems shows in the way Seth tries to generate music out of such unexciting concepts like Existentialism, Nihilism and Absurdity. The dreariness and the monotony of human life find a new expression in his poetry. Seth’s poetry contains more than what can be contained by words that he chooses to use. Seth is undoubtedly a magician who hypnotizes his words so that they create a form most suited to his expression.

Before we analyse Seth’s Emotions in his poems, we need to answer certain questions as: What is an emotion? This is certainly not an easy question to answer. Various psychologists have given various definitions for this term ‘emotion’. There are hundreds of definitions which are listed in different reviews and books. It is very difficult to arrive at any comprehensive definition of **emotion**. For example, emotion can be the way we feel when we are overwhelmed, our perceptions, thinking, behaviour, the physiological changes in the body. Emotions may also refer to the ways in which they are expressed: verbal, non-verbal, facial expressions, gestures or body language etc. Most of the everyday life affairs are tinged with feelings and

emotions, joy and sorrow, excitement and disappointment, love and fear, attraction and repulsion, hope and dismay, and many more feelings. Some psychologists define emotions as:

They add colour and spice to living; they are the sauce which adds pleasure and excitement to our lives. We anticipate our parties and dates with pleasure; we remember with a warm glow the satisfaction we got from getting a good grade; and we even recall with amusement the bitter disappointments of childhood. On the other hand, when our emotions are too intense and too easily aroused, they can easily get us into trouble. They can warp our judgement, turn our friends into enemies, and make us miserable as if we were sick with fever.ⁱⁱ

Another important aspect about emotion is the “context” or the situation in which an emotion appears because it provides us the information for judging the type of emotion being expressed.

Seth’s poetry is certainly an expression of his emotional outbursts but he is never swayed away by emotions. His emotions may only seem to overwhelm him but by the end of the poem, one discovers that Seth is the master craftsman who loves to give play to his words. In fact, it is the poet’s love for appropriate words that shows in the form of rhyme and rhythm. The beauty of his poetry lies in the controlled and sustained expression of his emotions. He never allows his emotions to overpower him. Emotions comprise only a part of his poetic genius.

Seth left India at a very young age of seventeen. He went abroad for his studies, thus staying away from home. For about two years i.e. 1980-82 he had been to Nanjing University, China for the purpose of his field research on *The Economic Demography of Seven Chinese Villages* (Which though he never completed) where he showed inclination not only towards Chinese language but also studied classical Chinese poetry. Like most of the modern poets, Seth’s poetry also provides an escape from the modern morose and disintegrated world into the world of art that is beautiful and permanent. What is noteworthy is that the nostalgic element of his poetry soon gets transformed into a realization of the real and his responsibility as a poet. He may find his work “as dreary as shit” but eventually he realizes that:

There is so much to do

There isn’t any time for feeling blue

There isn't any point in feeling sad

Things could be worse. Right now they are only bad.

(The Collected Poems: 140)

Seth overcomes this nostalgia by taking recourse to his poetic creativity. The need for fulfilment of emotional desires becomes central to a large number of his poems. *Mappings* is Seth's first anthology, and though it is in free verse, it is one of the most impressive of Seth's verses. The poems contained here are an expression of poet's experiences of the youth – his contentment at being home can be seen in poems like *Panipat* where he discusses about 'his aunts' busy 'Gossiping' and 'shelling peas'. He himself sits 'with a flute' and plays the 'scale of Lalit' but the "mournful meditative/Mood moves into a tune" and leads the poet to "God knows where —/Into a universe/Beyond — beyond Panipat". It is at this point that he realizes that he "could have done worse":

Than break my studies and come

Back home from Inglistan.

Punjab, pundits, panir,

Panipat and paan,

Family, music, faces,

Food, land, everything

Drew me back

...

(The Collected Poems: 3)

Though occasionally he is reminded "of other birds, /The nightingale, the wren", especially when he hears the 'Koyal sing'. He begins to think of alien lands but by the end of the poem the poet's perturbed emotions acquire a balance when his cousin offers to him a slice of mango and

I choose the slice with the seed

And learn from the sweet taste,

Well-known yet alien,

I must be home at last.

(The Collected Poems: 4)

In the second last line of the poem the poet's use of paradox in "Well-known yet alien" portrays some kind of confusion that emerges in the poet's mind. It appears that even at this point when the poet is home he is unaware of his belongingness.

Seth's desire to belong emotionally mainly results from his prolonged stay away from home. In one of his poems, *Home Thoughts from the Bay*, he asserts that he is "sick for home". His bisexuality only adds to his emotional insecurity as, perhaps, this is one reason that he has to stay away from home (India) because such a personality does not get acceptance in the Indian society.

In his poem, *Departure Lounge* Seth muses over his past – more particularly his relation with his father which he could not probably understand so deeply when they were together. He states:

I had few memories of your love

Or Kindness, even speech.

(The Collected Poems: 8)

Seth was not very close to his father. He makes use of the flashback technique to describe the way he was sometimes treated. He remembers very well when 'one Monsoon', he spared 'A 50-paise coin/ To a girl in rags.' It was against the principles set up by his father and Seth had to undergo punishment which was "not words or blows. /I had had beatings; as for words, /There were not many of those, /Sharp, or warm, between us. What you said/Was that you'd cut me dead." Seth never wanted to come close to his father as he mentions:

My act to you had one intent

To thwart you. I recall

The fear, hate, the contempt I felt

At that. It would appal

That sixteen-year-old to observe in me

The opposite of all three.

(The Collected Poems: 8)

The realization of being away and being “Safe from paternal strife, Paternal judgement and – how can I tell –/Paternal love as well?” dawns on him when he is “Twelve thousand miles” away from his father. By the close of this poem, however, Seth’s emotional outbursts are more sustained and he comes nearer wisdom and practicality of life when he finds his father’s ‘arm around my shoulder’. His father is moving away and he feels the emotional loss at this point. He just prays:

We meet on neutral ground: next time

May be at home. I should

Tell you as you walk through the door

I’ll miss you. If I could

Have a better father years ago

I could not now. I know.

(The Collected Poems:12)

Conclusion

It can be concluded from the above discussion that Vikram Seth has a deep-rooted emotion for his motherland. His poems show his strong emotional bond with his family and his parents. As seen in Indian culture, father, being the head of the family, maintains a certain distance with the family members which enables him to maintain the family structure and discipline. The same thing can be seen in the poetry of Vikram Seth. Various other emotions like loneliness, insecurity, sexual desire, etc. can be easily identified in his poetry.

References

ⁱSeth, Vikram. *The Collected Poems*. (Haryana, India:Penguin Random House India, 1995). (Hereafter referred to as The Collected Poems)

ⁱⁱClifford T. Morgan, Richard A. King, (et al). **Introduction to PSYCHOLOGY**. (New Delhi: Tata McGraw Hill, 2004) p. 310