



Understanding Cultural Resistance through Vikram Seth's *Two Lives*

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Compounded by the exigencies of colonial domination, exile, migration, and double migration, a diasporic writer is challenged and ruptured by the multiplicity of ambivalent affiliations of language, class, race, gender and sexuality. The writer often tends to deal with these affiliations as a mode of postcolonial grand narrative exposing the theoretical clichés of marginalization and resistance. But a writer of a much greater sensibility transcends these issues and moves towards a global narrative of reconciliation and resolution. A master of every genre — whether it is poetry, novel, libretto, travelogue or children book — Vikram Seth's *Two Lives* exhibits refreshing change in the postcolonial narrative technique. A masterful fusion of biography, memory, autobiography, documentary, history, fiction and essay like excursions, it resists theory biased theme of cultural resistance and gravitates towards a narrative of global resolution. Deeply entrenched in the history of Second World War it is a powerful reminder of the horrors and trauma of the War. *Two Lives* does not do quite what is expected of a postcolonial narrative or of an English novel in the tradition of Jane Austen (as Seth's magnum opus *A Suitable Boy*³ is considered). A cosmopolitan story, narrated by a truly cosmopolitan writer, It resists any branding of an Indian writing in English.

The book is divided into five independent parts, each approaching different facet of the story. It starts off with the young Vikram Seth arriving to live with his aunt and uncle while he attends school in England, and his perceptions of them. Then, we learn about Shanti's life, then Henny's, then their life together. I was expecting the book to be more narrative than it was; a large portion of it quotes various interviews and letters. Much of the narration that accompanies the quotes seems more like annotation or clarification of context. At first, the reader found this annoying, but he or she got used to it.

The story of Shanti and Henny is certainly makes fascinating reading. Shanti is a Hindu from India who studies dentistry in Germany, and Henny is the daughter of the Jewish family he boards with while doing so. Shanti Behari Seth was an extraordinary character with a great love for his duty and human concern for people. He enjoyed exercising his skills, he enjoyed solving problems and he enjoyed helping people. He was a man who broke the saying (myth) that "Indians are land locked people" by venturing to move to European countries, roaming different lands, pursuing higher education and by participating in World War II, losing a hand. Shanth was born on 08-08-1908 and died im1998. He was groomed in

the late years of British Raj and was sent by his family to Germany to study Dentistry in 1930. He knows nothing about German language landed and on the land of Germany. After facing so many troubles he settled as a paying Guest (boarding) with a German Jew family the Caros to which his future life partner and wife Hennerle Gerda Caro, belonged to. Henry was also born in 1908 to German Jew Business man Issac Caro and Lola Caro. Her family was highly cultured, patriotic and intensely German. When Shanti was taken into the family's house as a lodger Henry's first reaction was 'Don't take the black man!' But a friendship between them flowered afterwards. Henry, by that time was employed in a company belonged to Hans Mahnet later with whom Henry was in love and engaged to. Though Shanti proposes his love for Henry when he is in Germany, Henry does not reciprocate instead he rejects. However, their love story blossoms in England. Both of them are remarkable people in their own right – Shanti is a much-loved practising dentist, even though he lost one of his arms in World War II. Henny's story is quite tragic; her mother and sister do not make it out of Germany, and she has to face many truths about her family and friends after the war are over. I think her correspondences were the most interesting part of the book – we got an intimate look at how she coped with a tragedy of the magnitude of the Holocaust. She always remained incredibly dignified and restrained, in spite of learning the troubles and tortures her mother and sister faced. At times, we found ourselves wishing that the book was a little more focused. It seemed like Seth structured the book around trying to present every bit of information that he had (especially about Henny), rather than build a cohesive narrative. At other times, one can appreciate the tangents and extra details about the couple's family and friends.

We also get mixed feelings about the author talking about his own feelings at various points in the book. On the one hand, they make us feel more intimate – he is in fact, writing about the aunt and uncle that he loves and respects, so it's nice to see that come through. On the other hand, some of the things he says seem superfluous and distracting; for instance, he talks about the different areas of the world and technologies that Germany has had an impact on (including some thoughts on the future.)

A story of Vikram Seth's great grand uncle Shanti and aunty Henny, *Two Lives* covers almost a span of seven decades of the twentieth century. Shanti Behari Seth migrates in 1930s to Berlin to study dentistry. Henny Gerda Caro is the daughter of a Jewish-German family with whom Shanti lodged while studying in Germany. Henny was the private secretary to a director of the Mannheim Life Insurance Company. When she gets the news that her family has a lodger, she forbids her mother to 'take the black man' and this 'was the beginning of a relationship that was to last five and a half decades.'

Shanti falls in love with Henny but is immediately smitten because she is involved with Hans— her boss's son. Thus he can worship her only from a distance. Hitler became the Chancellor on 30th January 1933. Within short span of Hitler's assuming the power a handful laws aimed mainly at Jews had been passed, but some of those were also intended to target non-Aryans in general and to some extent foreigners. A month later Reichstag was set on fire and on 27 February Hitler assumed emergency powers. Thousands of communists and civil liberty leaders were arrested and put in jails and concentration camps. The severity of atrocities was gradually increased against non-aryans. The Nazi activists mainly targeted Jews by persecutions and murdered on different parts of the country. When the international community responded against these cruelties and decided to ban German business, Hitler passes a law against Jewish business on 1st April. Many more cruel laws were enacted. Jewish lawyers were banished from practice. The presence was to be increased until eventually

“Germany was Jew free and blood-peace .As the intensity of atrocities and prohibitions was increasing .After few months of 1936 Olympics at Berlin ,Shanti passed the state Medical Dentistry examination in distinction .But there was a fatal stroke to Shanti as the government prohibited the practice of foreign professionals on racial basis.So Shanti migrated to Britain in 1936 which was a cold and miserable year for Shanti as he had to prequalify his subjects at London. ” As Hitler comes to power both of them are displaced and ended up in London. After qualifying the exams he joins and serves in a British army dental unit during the World War II. There he serves in a British army dental unit until a shell blows off his right arm in Monte Cassino. Henny manages to flee in late July 1939 — just one month before the war breaks out — leaving her mother and sister behind. The only person she knows in England is Shanti. Until he returns from the war they keep a warm correspondence. After his return, the one arm dentist struggles to re-establish his dental practice and gradually a friendship is evolved between these two fractured lives. This unusual pair of exiles seeks sanctuary in each other and eventually marries after 18 years of friendship just to live a childless life at 18 Queens Road, Hendon.

While *Two Lives* is, on the surface, a double biography. Perhaps, it is more an intensely personal journey for Vikram Seth—an opportunity to explore the many sides of his uncle-Shanti, and his aunt- Henny, two people who loved and cared for him and were fixed points in his own firmament for most of his life. In doing that for himself, he delivers a subtle, yet affecting gift to his readers. A biography creates a record of a life, but it must also attempt to assemble many divergent strands and seemingly incoherent fragments of that life into a semblance of a story for a reader. It's hard to do even half-comprehensively with any one life -- it requires, for one thing, intimate access to the person him or herself, as well as a pretty good paper trail. Vikram Seth, in *Two Lives*, had such access to not one but two people, who were extraordinary individuals but even more so as a couple. It's the story of Shanti Behari Seth, the author's great uncle, and Hennyle Caro (Henny), a German Jewish refugee from the Nazis.

The two of them met during the early 1930s, when Shanti was in Berlin to do a doctorate in dentistry, and he rented a room in the Caros' house. In 1937 and 1939, respectively, they left Germany and settled in London. When the war broke out, Shanti enlisted, and served as a dentist for the troops in the African campaign, and later in Italy (where he lost an arm at Monte Cassino). Henny, for her part, lost her nuclear family at Auschwitz: unlike her, they were unable to get out in time. Henny and Shanti became a couple, and eventually married.

Two Lives is more a book of details than of ideas, because the sense of the story is so strong it always avoids the trap of familial self-indulgence or nostalgia. Seth did a series of very long interviews with Shanti in the mid-1990s, after Henny died. He also had access to hundreds of letters, including letters exchanged between Shanti and Henny, Shanti and the Seth family back in India, as well as between Henny and her family and friends in Germany. There are, of course, some exceptional synthetic passages, as well as some interesting comments by Seth on his method, both in this book and in earlier books like *A Suitable Boy* and *An Equal Music*. One such passage gives a sort of blueprint for Seth's earlier books, but also in a sense the current one. While taking a year off from his graduate studies in California to work on his Big Indian Novel (written in Delhi), Vikram Seth realized he was opening a very big can of worms. However reader soon can realize that the novel -- which has opened with a grand wedding -- now had so many characters whom he was interested in that. The readers need to take off at least a year simply to understand the varied worlds of law, politics, administration, medicine, farming, manufacture, commerce, education, music, religion, and so on, that these characters came from or worked in. What exactly did one do if

one visited a courtesan in 1951, and how would I find someone to tell me? How did the credit market for small shoemakers in Agra work, and what might be the effect of a credit squeeze on people who had little to fall back on? What was it like to be a brown sahib in a white managing agency in Calcutta in the fifties? Were there girls at St. Stephen's College in the late forties? Instead of being constrained by this research, we find inspire with new ideas. It also gave us the confidence to imagine ourselves into the insubstantial beings to give them shape and personality and vividness -- at least enough to make me wish to follow their lives. Seth wanted, of course, to tell a good story, but he also wanted to get things right. No matter how well a novel is received by readers or critics in general, if it does not ring true with those people who know from the inside the world it describes, it is in the final analysis an artistic failure. The readers wish that they had better archives and more non-ideological archival research. For many South Asians involved in the tumult of the twentieth century, such paper trails are hard to come by. Of the hundreds of thousands of Indians who served in the Second World War, how many left behind letters documenting their experiences, their everyday thoughts, or their thoughts about their loved ones? Not many, unfortunately. From the **Partition of 1947**, too, the best **non-official documentary evidence** has tended to come from personal interviews conducted by people like Urvashi Butalia (*The Other Side of Silence*).

Another issue that comes out of *Two Lives* is a **fresh and surprising view of an early bicultural/biracial relationship**. A few points of tension between Shanti Seth and Henny Caro on cultural matters are recorded in *Two Lives* (she didn't have much interest in visiting India, for instance), but they actually weren't especially significant in the relationship. Henny and Shanti were bound by stronger forces than ethnicity -- their shared memory of a pre-war social milieu in Germany that was utterly and irreparably destroyed, as well as a deep need for support and understanding that helped them cope with the damage the war did to them both: Henny, with the loss of her family under unthinkable circumstances, and Shanti, with the loss of his right arm, which might have been catastrophic for a right-handed practicing dentist (he managed, almost miraculously, to overcome it). The clichés about white women and English-educated Indian men simply don't apply in any way whatsoever to the life these two individuals shared. The readers wanted to share one more memorable quote before closing. Here, Seth is defining the relationship between Henny and Shanti as an attempt at reconstituting 'home'.

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