

Vikram Seth's Two Lives-A Multicultural Exposition of Human Heart

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Published in 2005, *Two Lives* appears essentially as a family memoir juxtaposed between history and biography, fact and fiction. It is a work centered on questions of expatriate diasporic identity, not easy either to define generically or to place spatially and culturally within the globalizing literary economy of the early twenty first century. It is a non-fiction narrative, set mostly in Germany and England which chronicles the lives of two of Vikram Seth's own relatives across two-thirds of the twentieth century, in a bulky and profusely illustrated book weighing in five hundred and three pages.

Two Lives is an unlikely story of a love relationship which endured for more than five decades. Fitted within that is a compelling sketch of life in Nazi Germany and the way the crimes of that regime would reverberate with the grim and sordid tales of humanity and depravity for years to come. Wrapped around both of these events is the Vikram Seth's compassionate yet analytical examination of Shanti and Henny as two vital human beings who share the common platform of humanity. Vikram Seth narrates the 'Two Lives' of Shanti and Henny which while being variously separate and intertwined, also provides a considerable amount of first person information about himself, his relations with his great aunt and uncle, and the background of his own writing process for both. In *Two Lives* itself and various of his other works, notably *A Suitable Boy*, The "Vikram Seth" emerging from the text has a dual representation: he is both the narrator of the story and a character with in it. Shanti and Henny who would have been otherwise relegated to obscurity, have gained lasting prominence and visibility and a coveted place therein becoming known to the general public because of Seth. As Rashmi Roshan Lal, a critic put it in a *Times of India* review, they are "worthy but unexceptional people now more famous after death than they could ever have dreamt of being while they lived." 1

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Being an expatriate writer, most of the works of Vikram Seth are culturally rich and varied as chronicled in *From Heaven's Lake* and *Two Lives*. He travelled a lot and visited various countries to imbibe the spirit and essence of the different cultures and this cultural diversity is reflected in all his works—*A Suitable Boy* has Indian culture as a back ground since it is based on post-independent India, *The Golden Gate* gives the glimpse of American yuppie culture of 1980s while *Two Lives* is a mingling of diverse cultures—Indian culture of large and extended families, respect for elders and love towards the younger generation. Shanti and Vikram Seth himself represent India and its ethnics and it is noticed in the whole text *Two Lives*, in the behavior of the narrator for his uncle and aunt when he seeks their advice in opting his subjects and in the kitchen, he helps his aunt to dry the utensils when she cleaned them. Shanti is also the epitome of Indian culture this is why, he respected his elder brother Raj who supported him in every way. As a German, Aunt Henny is quite reserved, intelligent and straight-forward. She dismisses Shanti's relatives quite candidly saying—"Shanti, your relations are here."² She gives the impression of being a courageous and balanced woman, that is the reason, despite knowing the dreadful end of her mother and sister, she never shows her pain to anyone, even her soul-mate, Shanti. She exemplifies an exiled German Jew because of the political upheavals in Germany, both Shanti and Henny have to leave Germany and settle down in London where they adopt as well as adapt according to British life style. In this way, *Two Lives* becomes the text of multi-cultural concern.

Shanti, a posthumous child, was spoiled by his mother and grandfather and taken in hand by his eldest sister. As he grew up, he completed his higher education from Banaras Hindu University and his tryst with dentistry brought him Berlin where his search for home compels him to meet Mrs. Caro, mother of his beloved Henny Caro. The initial reaction of Henny about accommodating Shanti is : *Nimm den schwarzen nicht.* (Don't take the black man). This was the beginning of the relationship that was to last for five and a half decades.

It was at this crucial period when Shanti was struggling to acquire his dentist's degree that the most fearful and formidable period of World

history took place. When Hitler became the chancellor of Germany, Nazism came into existence. Hitler's emergence made German Jews uncertain and insecure about their future since he despised Jews and his prime agenda was to make Germany free from Jews. Being a Jew herself, Henny became apprehensive about her future and the safety of her family and then, Shanti stood as a care taker of Caro family and from here the tale of love and sacrifice begins.

Shanti had set his heart on Henny, though her sister, Lola was more loyal to him. Ella, Henny's mother, who had come to implicitly trust Shanti, reading his thoughts once and prophetically told Henny—"Even if you marry Hans, as long as Shanti is around, You won't starve."³

The chaotic unrest and insecurity in Germany compelled Shanti to leave the place as soon as he could. He took residence in London. However, again certain hurdles stood before him when he learnt that his doctorate degree was invalid in London and he again had to qualify the exam. On the other hand, Henny's family was robbed of jewels and other valuable things. Worse still, Henny's brother immigrated to South America leaving behind the sisters and mother. Shanti felt hapless as he could not sponsor them due to his own meager income. Due to Nazi atrocities, Henny has to leave Germany at once and shifted to London at his boss' relative. She had come with a few possessions not knowing that she would never get a chance to see her relatives again. After the six months, the war broke out.

During the second world war, Shanti also was commissioned to serve at the war-front on the behalf of Britain, as a lieutenant. By June 1940, the Germans had defeated Denmark, Norway, Holland, Belgium and most surprisingly France. in the course of battle at Monte-Cassino, Shanti lost his right arm. At that time, he was in touch with Henny through correspondence and his letters to Henny, written in shaky capital letters with his left hand, is a moving testimonial of the irrevocable loss. For Shanti, the loss of arm meant loss of dentist job but in this adverse situation, Henny's encouraging words bring moral support to Shanti. Currently citizens of a country foreign to them both, Shanti and Henny are drawn closer to each other by the adverse circumstances of the war.

In different ways, the Nazi atrocities affect them both in irreversible and deeply damaging ways. They turn to each other for support and solace: Shanti is the one to meet Henny when she arrives from Germany; she turns to him for advice and it is to him that she writes during seeking refuge in bomb shelters. Even during the war, when Shanti was posted in different part of Africa or in Italy ,the epistolary narrative that Vikram Seth used, reflects their concern for each other ,and in Shanti's case ,it is love but for Henny , it is only concern since in her solitary and exiled situation, Shanti has been the sole link to her old world.

The brutal manslaughter of Henny's mother and sister revealed the cruelty of Nazi regime or the Third Reich that how heinously they demolished jews just because Germans were considered to be the purest representation of Aryanism and they wanted to prove their superiority ,therefore the jews and other deemed undesirable were murdered.But Hitler and his Nazi had to pay for their inhuman or monstrous deeds when during the second World War,Soviet and American troops invaded Germany and Germany had to surrender unconditionally. Consequently, Hitler committed suicide and with the end of Nazi regime,Hitler's plan "Thousand year Reich" lasted only twelve destructive and irredeemable years.

These political ups and downs of Germany and the ill-treatment of jews by the Germans affected the lives of Shanti and Henny. Henny had broken out psychologically as well as physically facing the trauma of losing her family during the third Reich. But being a strong woman, she always remained silent about her incurable pain to Shanti. She respected him because of his understanding and mutual support in her difficult times and it made their bond matchless.

Thus, the inquisitive nature of Vikram Seth, the writer and facts of his uncle and aunty's lives motivate him to shape this memoir and in it, his eleven longish interviews of Shanti uncle and the letters of Henny found in a trunk were quite helpful since these letters dealt with a period of great historical consequence in Germany and helped to enrich ,through their intimacy, the reader's understanding of the lives of ordinary people caught up in the mesh of contemporary events.

It is commendable that Seth has accomplished a very interesting double biography that far from becoming dull and boring, opens a different dimension of Seth's merit. At the same time, It unfolds an intriguing story of Henny whose instinctive words of caution on seeing Shanti for the first time at her threshold changes quite imperceptibility to a state of quiet acceptance and comfortable camaraderie that unknowingly and effortlessly-"Don't take the blackman" 4 discarding her hard. rigid German stand to speak, for the first and last time ever, in endearing English for the same man when she was dying," Cathy, take care my husband."

Their strange but integrated life that went beyond the bounds of generic understanding, the circumstances that went beyond human control also throws light on the second world war and the brutality that followed thousands of jews in concentration camps, Auschwitz and Theresienstadt. Vikram Seth's *Two Lives* is a biography, history, family memoir and fiction all at once, and in a larger sense ,crosses all defined borders of area studies. It creates a new literary terrain where histories of resilient human relationships against the backdrop of migration and war are re inscribed in a hybrid genre.

The very title 'Two Lives' is a strong indication of the disparate identities of these two relatives of Seth, who came together under one roof due to unexpected quirk of fate ,through the predestined hand of chance –one choosing London for want of any professional stability in Germany and the other ,a native of Germany ,seeking stability in London ,with odds against her . Their marriage is one of mutual agreement , rather than agreement . Paradoxically, Shanti and Henny stand in individual casts, despite their professed union and togetherness. Both of them maintain their separated lives , as distinctly as oil that floats on the surface of water though appearing to be one. Henny tried to arrange her life with Shanti since she had lost her family in the Third Reich and it was her compulsion to live with him while on the part of Shanti, It was a relationship that bloomed in unfavorable circumstances. They continued to exist as a diasporic figures for the world as well as for each other. The author succeeds in delineating their charismatic yet enigmatic lives.

Love, elusiveness and awareness of life and it's "many-splendored glass" conveys that this book can only be a fragment of the slave across the white radiance of eternity : each of these elements is vital to the kind of generically innovative ,cosmopolitan literary and historical project that Two Lives engages in : home and homelessness, exile and refuge, loving bonds across cultures and generations: Two Lives reconfigures these themes in compelling ways, connotatively stating, in a richly pithy distillation the book's vision-

"Shaken about the globe ,we live out our fractured lives, Enticed or fleeing, we reform ourselves, taking on partially the coloration of our new backgrounds. Even our tongues are alienated and rejoined- a multiplicity that creates richness and confusion." 6

References

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2- *Seth,Vikram – Two Lives .New Delhi.The Penguin Group,2005.Print 4-499*

3-*Ibid.print-105-499*

4-*Ibid.Print-81-499*

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