

Indian Poetry in English
Prof. Binod Mishra
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences
Indian Institute of Technology, Roorkee

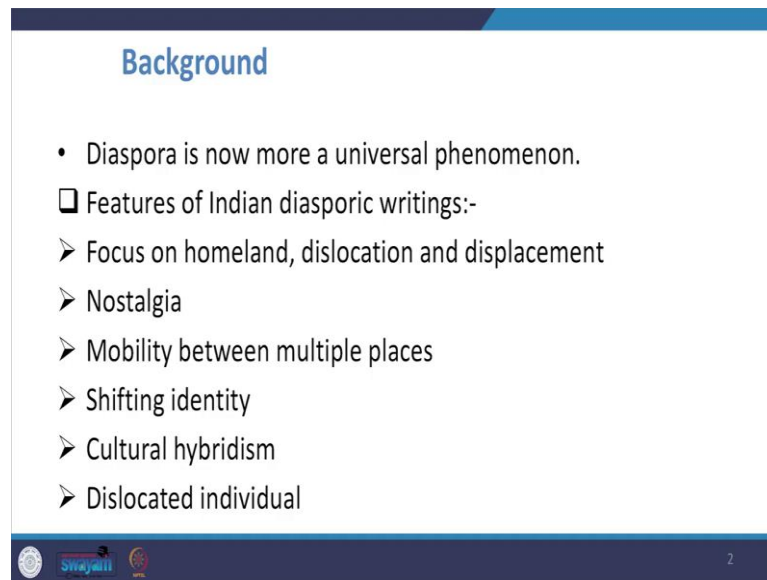
Lecture - 22
Vikram Seth

Good morning friends and welcome back to NPTEL online certification course on Indian Poetry in English. You all must remember that presently we are dealing with Indian English poets and mainly diasporic writings----- diasporic Indian English poetry. We have already read some of the major poets and the poet that we are going to discuss today is one of the most you know relevant contemporary diasporic poets and the name of the poet is Vikram Seth.

The moment I use the word or take the name of Vikram Seth, majority of my listeners may remember that Vikram Seth became famous more as a novelist than as a poet. But, my dear friends in the lecture today we are going to discuss more of Vikram Seth's poetry because, primarily Vikram Seth was a poet. And, how and when Vikram Seth became a diasporic poet is also understood by the fact that right from his birth he had to change several places.

Perhaps, I should not be wrong if I say that most of the poets actually carry a sort of diaspora within, while they keep on moving from one place to another. You have already learnt the qualities of diaspora. In fact, it should not be an exaggeration to say that all humans are diasporic, maybe some of them get the opportunities to go outside and then they face the real diaspora. But, even in a limited space or in a limited country, we, at times, feel like being a diasporic one.

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Background

- Diaspora is now more a universal phenomenon.
- Features of Indian diasporic writings:-
 - Focus on homeland, dislocation and displacement
 - Nostalgia
 - Mobility between multiple places
 - Shifting identity
 - Cultural hybridism
 - Dislocated individual

Swajati 2


Now, diaspora has become a universal phenomena and majority of the poets or writers who are writing today some way or the other they cannot distance themselves from the feelings of diaspora. We have already learnt in the previous lectures the salient features of diaspora namely displacement, dislocation, nostalgia, mobility, change or shifting of identity. But, then in a global world of today we feel that there is a sort of cultural hybridism, fine.

And the moment you start feeling a sort of dislocation as an individual you have to realize that now the entire world has become a global platform. And, we have to assimilate ourselves in the on- goings of the world in order to drive ourselves from the feeling of alienation and all.

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Vikram Seth

- An active voice of Indian diaspora
- Born in Calcutta in 1952 in an educated family
- His mother was the first female judge of Delhi High Court.
- Went to England for higher education
- Composed poetry, wrote novel, travelogue, memoir and children fiction.
- Sahitya Akademi Award (1988) for *The Golden Gate*
- Awarded with Padma Shri in 2007.
- Conferred Pravasi Bhartiya Samman in 2005.



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Now, when we discuss diaspora and while we discuss diasporic poetry especially Indian English diasporic poetry, suddenly the name of Vikram Seth becomes very relevant and he is one of the most contemporary diasporic writers of today. He was actually, if we have a look at his birth and parentage, we will find that how right from the beginning he had to experience all these things.

Because he was born in Calcutta in 1952, he had his schooling at different places because his father being associated with the Bata Company. So, Vikram's early education was at Patna and then he moved to Dehradun where he read in a Doon School. And, it was Doon School that actually brought a sort of vicissitudes in Vikram's life because at Doon School, Vikram had the feelings of loneliness. Since, he was an avid reader, a voracious one, most of the time he used to spend his time in reading.

And, that is why he did not mix too much with his friends and he was considered to be a loner and this loneliness actually inspired him so much and gave him so much time, that he started making some small jottings which later on converted into poetry. And, at a time he was also the editor of the journal, poetry journal from Doon School. And, this actually paved his path to a new horizon and he moved on to China first for a course for 2 years and then he also went to Stanford.

He also got several scholarships my dear friend. He went to England for higher education and got several awards because after one fellowship, he got another fellowship and for

that he had to discontinue his Ph.D also. It would not be an exaggeration if we add the adjective 'multi' to the name of Vikram Seth because, Vikram Seth was a multilingual fine. He knew so many languages and all the languages he learnt. He learned several languages Chinese, because he spent his time in Ningxia University of China and there he learned Chinese, then he also learned German, he learnt Welsh, also English, of course, he knew and then Hindi.

So, that also gave him an opportunity to translate many of the works as well. It was because of his hard work and his creativity that he got several awards namely Sahitya Akademi Award he got in 1988 for one of his famous books entitled *The Golden Gate* which we shall discuss in our lectures to follow.

And, then he was also awarded in 2007 Padma Shri. Actually, right from the beginning Vikram Seth who was a different personality, he used to react, he used to rebel. And, there was certain ambivalent feelings also that he has got in inheritance because he was not having a very sound relationship with his father. He got too little time to spend with his father and in some of his poems also he has mentioned how he actually waited for his company and even for his speech.

Vikram Seth was also conferred upon Pravasi Bhartiya Samman in 2005. Vikram actually has been rather switching between two countries sometimes between England and China, sometimes between England and India and then between U.S and India. And so, when he wrote *The Golden Gate*, actually he became popular with *The Golden Gate*, fine.

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- After writing *The Golden Gate*, he returned to India and highlighted the hollowness of life in foreign land.
- Now he lives both in India and UK.
- He bought the house of famous Anglican poet George Herbert and renovated that.
- After the great success of *The Suitable Boy*, he announced to bring *The Suitable Girl* which has not come yet.
- Translated Hindi and Chinese poetry into English.

“Seth himself is a product of the diaspora, though in his fiction he has chosen to focus on individual countries and their cultures from an observer/commentator point of view rather than on the experience of migration.” - Rita Joshi

He returned to India probably in 1987 perhaps and highlighted the hollowness of the life in foreign land. He actually as I have been saying straddles between London and India, one thing that is very surprising and that makes him surprisingly a famous poet that he bought the house of the famous Anglican poet George Herbert fine in Salisbury and he renovated it and he lives there.

After this now one thing that actually is worth mentioning about Vikram Seth is why Vikram Seth is a diasporic writer because, he actually combines in himself so many genres. He is not only a poet, he is also a novelist and many people as I said in the beginning many people know Vikram for his being a novelist because, *The Suitable Boy* which actually earned him a lot and with *The Suitable Boy*, he became very famous.

Then after the success of *Suitable Boy*, he also decided to write the *Suitable Girl* which till now has not come out. And, then he also got a quite a good amount fine as an advance for one of his other novels, that is *Two Lives*. Vikram also got the opportunity of translating Hindi and Chinese poetry into English. He got influenced by some of the Chinese poets while he was living in China and then it was by accident that once he came across a copy of Alexander Pushkin’s book.

And since he read it and was so much influenced that he wanted to write something out of it and he has done it. Here it is quite significant to mention what he told in one of the interviews to Rita Joshi or what Rita Joshi tells about Seth. “Seth himself is a product of

the diaspora, though in his fiction he had chosen to focus on individual countries and their cultures from an observer or commentator's point of view rather than on the experience of migration.”

It is actually to be added that once upon a time somebody asked him a question as to which is your language or which language would he prefer, why he writes in so many languages and Vikram had responded that these are my instruments. So, through the instruments of language, he actually made his life easier and he was actually a frequent traveler, he used to travel a lot.

There goes a story that once upon a time in China, he actually started humming a sound from one of the movies. And, the song was in Hindi and this actually brought him quite close to the police academy and they arranged him for a ticket and that actually prompted his visit from China to Tibet and through Tibet, he came to Kathmandu and from there to India.

So, he is actually a multi-dimensional, a multifarious, a multi-dimensional genius. Now, since we have to focus our discussion on Vikram Seth's poetry collections, we must know how many poetry collections he has to his credit. In fact, Vikram has composed 8 poetry collections.

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Poetry Collections

- *Mappings* (1980)
- *The Tale Of Melon City* (1981)
- *The Humble Administrator's Garden* (1985)
- *All You Who Sleep Tonight* (1990)
- *Beastly Tales* (1991)
- *Three Chinese Poets* (1992)
- *The Frog and the Nightingale* (1994)
- *Summer Requiem: A Book of Poems* (2015)
- *A Doctor's Journal Entry for August 6, 1945*

The very first is *Mappings* which he had composed in a 1980 and it was the time when he was going to visit China and in the meantime this *Mappings* got published from other Writers Workshop Calcutta. And, then came *The Tale of Melon City* and then *The Humble Administrator's Garden* which is actually based on three countries, we shall come to that when we discuss it.

And, it actually talks about art, it talks about art, it talks about the beauty of a garden because right from the beginning Vikram was quite drawn towards beauty. And, you can find vestige of love in majority of his poems, the love that he had lost, the love that he was yearning, the love that he was trying to earn and the love that he was trying to long for.

So, the entire book *Humble Administrator's Garden* which is actually a sort of we can consider it is a sort of memento of love and love for beauty and this beauty about the Administrator's Garden. It is said in one of the poems he says that the means he got it, I mean the reference is to the administrator; the means through which he got it, is not known or whatever it may be but beauty is beyond all scrapples. So, he mentions there, we shall come to that.

Then came *All Who You Sleep Tonight*, then *The Beastly Tales* which is actually based on many of the animals and birds, then he also wrote *Three Chinese Poets*, he was also influenced by three Chinese poets and he wrote a volume on it. Then *The Frog and the Nightingale* which many of us are familiar with because, right from the beginning we have been learning this poem, reading this poem and the poem is actually in a very funny, witty manner but then there is a message.

And, thanks to Vikram Seth who actually has created such a melody, even though the poem is based on the melody this is about the song that the frog sings and the nightingale sings. But, the gist of the poem is that the frog towards the end tells the nightingale that one must always follow one's own voice or one's own choice. There was a competition between the frog and the nightingale and that actually caused the mass to the nightingale, because the frog had become very clever.

So, there actually the poet in Vikram Seth tries to take a dig and at times through epigrams, through parodies, through pastiches, he actually creates a world of beauty and wonder that people would actually long to go after. Then came *Summer Requiem* which

is also a book of poems published in 2015 and then the Doctor's Journal Entry for August 6, 1945.

Now, you might be thinking that why Vikram Seth has been rated so highly, it is not only because of his poetry, but since he is also exposed to different genres such as novels, *The Suitable Boy* you know and *Equal Music* fine. And, all these it is very difficult to say whether they are novels in verse or verse in novel, because even the novels are full of the passages of poems. And, the language is so poetic that you would like to love to go miles and miles to listen and to read the lines of Vikram's collections.

So, when we talk about the novels, I think even though it is in the form of a verse, *The Golden Gate* which is in the form of a verse, but then it is a novel, it is actually a narrative; we shall talk about it.

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Novels

- *The Golden Gate* (1986) - a novel in verse
- *A Suitable Boy* (1993) - adopted by BBC as a television series in 2020 and made available on Netflix in India where the main characters were played by Tanya Maniklata, Tabu, Ishaan Khatter, and Rasika Dugal.
- *An Equal Music* (1999)

And, this *Golden Gate* it is quite longer, you will find it is quite longer, but it is very interesting rather. And, then the field of language which you can find and it is here that Vikram Seth tries a sort of pattern, you know till now we have been saying that poetry had become actually free from all the limitations.

But, when we delve into the world of Vikram Seth we find that poetry has its own form, its own in its own form, its own pattern and there we can consider Vikram to be a neo-classical fine, a neo classical writer who actually combines in his works so many things

fine. And, then comes *A Suitable Boy* which is also adopted by BBC Television service in 2020, it actually had been converted into a series and it is also available on Netflix in India fine.

And, it also became very famous, the major characters who played were Tanya Maniktala, Tabu, Ishaan Khatter and Rasika Dugal and then came *An Equal Music*. You know you should not be astonished to know that Vikram had also an eye for music, you know during his hours of isolation he had. And, that is why that actually has resulted in the sort of melody that Vikram has created.

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Other Writings

- *From Heaven Lake: Travels through Sinkiang and Tibet* (1983)- a travel book.
- *Beastly Tales From Here and There* (1992)- a collection of 10 short stories.
- *Two Lives* (2005)- a non-fiction work where there is a love story of an Indian boy and a German girl.

There are other writings by Vikram namely *From Heaven Lake*, it is actually a sort of travelogue and they travel through Sinkiang and Tibet. It is a travelogue, a travel book and then *Beastly Tales*, as we have been saying that it is actually a collection of 10 short stories and they are actually about animals fine. *The Two Lives* 2005, it is also a non-fiction work where there is a love story of an Indian boy and a German girl fine.

So, these are his other writings. We shall actually try to discuss major poems of Vikram Seth and in a way we will formulate an idea or will come to a conclusion how Vikram Seth has tried to assimilate himself in a new culture. Because, till now we have been reading that most of these diasporic poets they have actually been ruing for the loss, repenting for the loss. But, in Vikram's world you will find a different sort of thing is there because, he believes that life which you have got has to be lived.

We can say it as a theme of *carpe diem*; eat, drink and be merry. So, whatever comes your way you have to enjoy, you do not have to rue for the loss rather you actually have to compensate that loss by living the life that you have got.

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General Themes & Elements of His Poetry

- Nostalgia
- Multiculturalism
- Hybridity
- Transnational
- Exile, rootlessness and displacement
- Love, sorrow, relationship, family, and failure
- Cross- cultural affinities
- Theme of immigration

"If I died. Who'd be sad?
Who'd weep?
Would anybody?" (*The Golden Gate*)

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And, that is why at times Vikram Seth has also been criticized, because in *Golden Gate* there is one line which is very famous where the poet says, if I died, who would be sad? Who would weep? Would anybody? I mean this actually raises lots of questions, it is actually a question of an individual who is in a foreign land, an individual who thinks of his own past and he tries to associate himself, but then who will weep for him if he dies instantly or all of a sudden in a different land?

So, this raises several questions and the themes around which becomes poetry like that of all other diasporic poets revolve are nostalgia, multiculturalism, but he has adopted multiculturalism that is why he is not confined only to India. Of course, he feels the loss of his own country, but at the same time he wants to reverberate himself, he wants to rejoice himself in the life that is there around him. Hybridity, transnationalism, then rootlessness and exile that you can find in some of the lines.

Love, sorrow, but majority of his poems are about the loss of love. It is very difficult to say whose loss he is actually trying to depict or decipher through his poetry, but then throughout majority of his poems you can find the loss of the love. And we shall read

some of the poems in order to justify, testify attached to the truth that what sort of romantic fervor that Vikram has in his heart.

So, he talks of relationship also, his failure at times also, there are at times repentances also. Repentances of his own, some of his own guilt also, fine and the theme of immigration that is prevalent.

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Mappings

- A young man's attempt at 'self-scrutiny'
- Youthful restlessness, rebellious concerns
- Mapping of his diverse selves
- Ambivalent feelings

Orphaned at two, you ran away
From Baoji at fifteen.
The tin shack, the Mussourie store
Hunger, the freezing rain,
Nothing could split the shell of hurt and
pride.
You would have rather died.
Than faced that uneasy ease again,
Unsure of tenderness
Where you most craved it, did it grow
Too anguished to express?
You screened your love: though mama
says you cried
The day Baoji died.
("Departure Lounge")

Now, let us try to have a sort of analysis or let us try to touch upon some of the areas through which his works actually revolve. The very first work like *Mappings*, as I told you since it was the first work, it is actually a search for the self like a young man having a sort of quest for his own identity, a young man attempting at self scrutiny, a self evaluation, analysis.

And then of course, there are passages where you can find youthful restlessness, rebellious concerns as I told you there was a sort of ambivalent attitude or ambivalent feeling towards his father, because he did not I mean Vikram did not get much company of his father and that is why he had developed a sort of ambivalent attitude. So, and then there are rebellious reactions also at times, we can read some of the lines from one of the poems entitled *A Departure Lounge*. The name of the poem is *Departure Lounge*.

Let us look at the words and then you can find out how there is a sense of pervading loss that one can view, even though it may not be very transparent though an opaque yet, it is actually tinged with a sort of loss.

Orphaned at two, you ran away
from Baoji at fifteen.
The tin shack, the Mussourie store,
hunger, the freezing rain,
nothing could split the shell of hurt and pride.
You would have rather died,
than faced that uneasy ease again,
unsure of tenderness,
where you most craved it, did it grow,
too anguished to express?
You screened your love: though mama
says you cried
the day Baoji died.

I mean you can analyze it from different angles and find what sort of loss is prevalent in these lines. So, *Mappings* being the first collection, it may be full of youthful restlessness, but as the poet moves and as the poet actually composes another volume because by that time he had been to China and in a university and where he actually wrote “From Humble Administrator’s Garden.”

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From Humble Administrator's Garden

- “Divided into three sections; each of them is named after a tree symbolizing China, India and California respectively: (“Wutong,” “Neem” and “Live-Oak”).”
- Sense of immediacy, Nature of Art

Sudden delight: they point upwards
and scowl
One imitates a baby elephant
The other glares and totters like an
owl
Then stomping through flower-beds
with glee
(The North Temple Tower)

Two lovers come
To gaze at fish and foreigner in the park
With a pen-knife hack their name of bark
For posterity
(The Gentle Waves Pavilion)

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It actually added to his fame more than anything else, because this is one such collection where you can find that Vikram tries to amalgamate three cultures. And, these three cultures are actually separated into three sections and each of the section is named after a

tree which symbolizes a country. For example, the very first section is Wutong that actually refers to a tree in a China, then comes the Neem--- Neem as you all know that Neem is an Indian tree and in the Neem also he has actually through neem; neem is actually a metaphor. So, very metaphorically he talks and finally the live oak; it is often said the live oak actually refers to USA or America. It is often said that he felt himself at ease in U.S, where there was a lot of mixing, where there is a lot of flexibility, where there is a lot of you see animation and all.

But, throughout this “Humble Administrative Administrator’s Garden,” you can find beauty once again back to like the romantics. And, these romantics who often you know yearn for nature, here in Vikram Seth you can also find such yearnings.

Of course, at times, there are differences we will see also when we take up some of the lines. Let us take one line from one poem “The North Temple Tower,”. The poem is titled **The North Temple Tower**.

Sudden delight: they point upwards and scowl,

one imitates a baby elephant,

the other glares and totters like an owl;

Look at the rhymes. So, he is conscious of the rhymes-

then stomping through flower beds with glee.

So, this is from The North Temple Tower, why I am saying all this. I actually want all of you to be familiar with his consciousness for rhymes, meters; but then at times when he does that, he actually because in the beginning it was not like that. So, it appears that he has again tried to bring back the metrical composition and all. There is another poem named “The Gentle Waves Pavilion and here once again he shows a sort of romantic yearning and all and by saying.

“Two lovers/ come to gaze at fish and foreigner in the park,/ with a pen knife hack their name of bark for posterity.”

Now, one can also find concern for ecology and one can also find a sort of despair how the lovers, they often write their names on the bark of the trees. And, we can be reminded of several other romantic poems where you know we have found in many poets namely Andrew Marvell, then in John Keats In Keats actually it is too much.

In Andrew Marvell, we have found where it is said Apollo hunted Daphne so, that she might laurel grow fine. So, there is also a sort of melancholy, but then there is a sort of romantic yearning involved in it. So, this is actually into three sections and all these sections as I said are actually attributed to three names wutong, neem and live oak. One can find an immediacy in these poems and beauty, the concept of beauty has been shown too much.

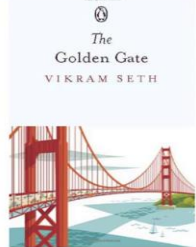
We can later on find some more lines as we go further. But, here the time has come that we must discuss; since we have ‘at our back I always hear time’s winged chariot hurrying near’, my dear friend. So, it would be an injustice if we do not discuss *The Golden Gate* which even though is a verse, but written in a novelistic way, fine.

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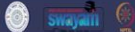
The Golden Gate

- His first novel. Written in verse.
- It captures the life of modern California.
- It is the story of John Brown, a Silicon Valley Computer expert. His quest for love is the main theme.
- It highlights the loneliness in modern American society.
- Divided into thirteen sections.
- *The Golden Gate* follows the fourteen-line stanza pattern of Eugene Onegin which was written by Alexander Pushkin and translated by Johnson.
- Vikram Seth follows the fourteen-line stanza pattern of Eugene Onegin, which is written in verses of iambic tetrameter with the unusual rhyme scheme a,b,a,b, c,c,d,d, e,f,f,e, g,g.
- Seth's novel comprises 594 sonnets, all written in iambic tetrameter.

He gives tribute to Pushkin -:
 “– Pushkin’s masterpiece
 In Johnston’s luminous translation:
 Eugene Onegin – like champagne
 Its effervescence stirs my brain.”
 (*The Golden Gate* 102)



The Golden Gate
VIKRAM SETH


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It was his first novel, but written in a verse form. It actually talks about the life in California and it is it actually talks about a failed love. The failure of a lover namely John, you know, John is actually John Brown, it is a story of John Brown, a Silicon Valley Computer expert. And, his quest of love because he was not able to recognize his first love and the first beloved become an advisor and she always used to say you must not wait.

But, then actually when he had his attraction for another beloved and that beloved simply left him because there was a quarrel over a cat and finally John is left disappointed, dejected. So, it highlights actually the loneliness in modern American society. We will

find that Vikram Seth actually tries to mix modern elements with Victorianism fine. So, the American society, the loneliness that is there and of course, as I have been saying that right from the beginning Vikram had been suffering from a sort of loneliness, though thirteen sections are there in this book.

And, it is said that this book actually resembles Pushkin's masterpiece, fine. Pushkin's masterpiece which was actually translated as Eugene Onegin fine. And, you know it is a longer one, *The Golden Gate* is quite longer around 7500 lines.

Here, what Vikram Seth does is--- he actually follows a fourteen-line stanza pattern, but he does not use iambic pentameter rather what he uses is a tetrameter, the lines are quite uneven at times, unusual rhyme scheme. And, this novel comprises 594 sonnets, all written in iambic tetrameter that you must remember. We shall take some of the lines in order to understand it.

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from The Golden Gate

When fear grows too intense to handle;
We shrink into a private smile,
Surprised when here and there a candle
Drives back the dark a little while,
A little space, before it gutters;
Or in the madness a voice utters
Words full of calm that to us seem
To bear the dry light of a dream
And stain our waking with more sorrow.
The night of hate that covers earth,
The generous country of our birth,
The single land from which we borrow
All that is ours-air, insight, tears.
Our fragile lives-for a few years, (7.1)

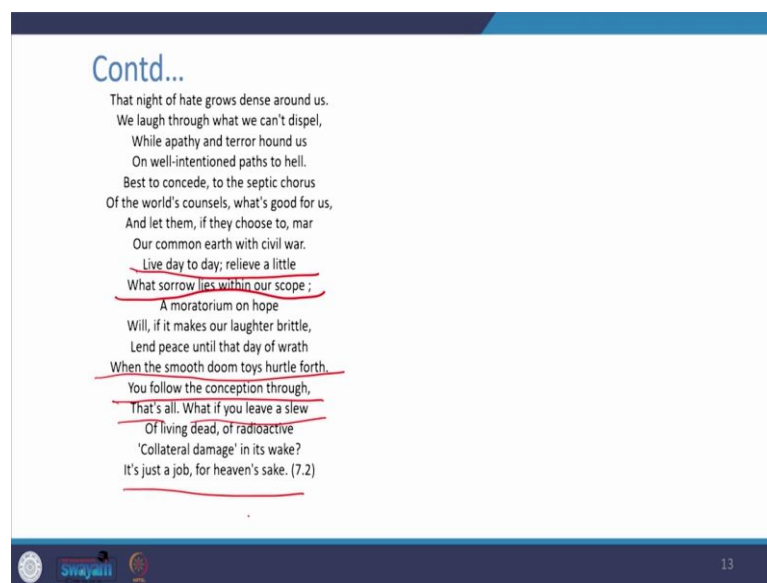
Now, look at the lines:

When fear grows too intense to handle;/ we shrink into a private smile, / surprised when here and there a candle,/ drives back the dark a little while,/ A little space before it gutters/ or in the madness a voice utters,/ Words full of calm that to us seem/ to bear the dry light of a dream/ and stain our waking with more sorrow./ The night of hate that

covers earth,/ the generous country of our birth, /the single land from which we borrow,/ All that is ours airs, insight, tears,/ our fragile lives for a few years.”

So, there is a longing, there is a yearning, but at the same time there is a fear you know, every longing, every love is full of fears. And, here you know John also shares this or such a sort of fate as it moves, because it is quite longer and it is very difficult to read all the lines. But, then I have provided some of the lines just in order not only to raise your curiosity, but also to satiate your curiosity.

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Contd...

That night of hate grows dense around us.
We laugh through what we can't dispel,
While apathy and terror hound us
On well-intentioned paths to hell.
Best to concede, to the septic chorus
Of the world's counsels, what's good for us,
And let them, if they choose to, mar
Our common earth with civil war.
Live day to day; relieve a little
What sorrow lies within our scope ;
A moratorium on hope
Will, if it makes our laughter brittle,
Lend peace until that day of wrath.
When the smooth doom toys hurtle forth.
You follow the conception through,
That's all. What if you leave a slew
Of living dead, of radioactive
'Collateral damage' in its wake?
It's just a job, for heaven's sake. (7.2)

Swajali 13

That night of hate grows dense around us,/ we laugh through what we cannot dispel/
while apathy and terror hound us/ on well-intentioned paths to hell./ Best to concede to
the septic chorus/ of the world's councils, what is good for us/ and let them, if they
choose to mar/ our common earth with civil war./ Live day to day, relieve a little,/ live
day to day, relieve a little. What sorrow lies within our scope;/ a moratorium on hope/
will if it makes our laughter brittle,/ lend peace until that day of wrath./When the smooth
doom toys hurtle forth,/ you follow the conception through/ that is all, what if you leave
a slew/ of living dead of living dead of radioactive,/ collateral damage in its wake?/ It is
just a job, for heaven's sake.”

We are reminded of John Keats, where he says----do we wake or sleep?

So, there is a sort of uncertainty in love and that love being carried further. And, the lines-- some of the lines that I am going to read will actually give you the essence or the quintessence of what Vikram actually wants to convey in *The Golden Gate*.

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Contd.

"I'm employed, healthy, ambitious,
Sound, solvent, self-made, self-possessed.
But all my symptoms are pernicious.
The Dow-Jones of my heart's depressed.
The sunflower of my youth is wilting.
The tower of my dreams is tilting.
The zoom lens of my zest is blurred.
The drama of my life's absurd.
What is the root of my neurosis?
I jog, eat brewer's yeast each day,
And yet I feel life slip away.
I wait your sapient diagnosis.
I die! I faint! I fail! I sink!"
"You need a lover, John, I think."
(The Golden Gate 14)

I am employed, healthy, ambitious,/ sound, solvent, self-made, self-possessed;

Look at the beauty, look at the sound fine.

"I am employed, healthy, ambitious, / sound, solvent, self-made, self-possessed, / but all my symptoms are pernicious/, the Dow-Jones of my heart is depressed, / the sunflower of my youth is wilting/ (wilting, fading.) The tower of my dreams is tilting, / the zoom lens of my zest is blurred, / the drama of my life is absurd. / What is the root of my neurosis?/ I jog, eat brewer's yeast each day/ and yet I feel life slip away./I wait your sapient diagnosis./ I die, I faint, I fail, I sink;/You need a lover,John,I think."

Are you not reminded of John Keats? Are you not reminded of William Blake? Fine and you know—"You need a lover John, I think." That is what John's first flame tells John, but John is not able to. And, when he goes for the hand of his beloved, you know actually that is very you know transitory, since they fight over a cat and love finally, is abandoned. So, we are actually reminded of John Keats, where also we can find that there and as we proceed further you can find rather that in some of the poems also you know now Vikram Seth was too fond of drinking also. And, we find the images of drinks

in majority of his poems, if we are reminded of John Keats where Keats used to say that by having the hemlock, he can actually refresh himself. There is a one poem named “Ode to Nightingale”, where he says fine, he thinks of a drink and then through that he wants to rejoice.

But, here as we go to the poems of Vikram Seth, there he says, that I simply feel sleep fine, we will come to that. ‘A drowsy numbness pains my sense’ that is what Keats says, but Vikram Seth says that it finally, induces me to sleep, it induces me to sleep, fine.

(Refer Slide Time: 35:11)

Some Memorable Lines

<p><u>“Ceasing Upon The Midnight”</u></p> <p>[...] To cease upon The midnight under the live-oak Seems too derisory a joke. The bottle lies on the ground. He sleeps. His sleep is sound (Seth, <i>The Humble Administrator’s Garden</i> 61).</p>	<p><u>“Night in Jiangning</u></p> <p>A glass of tea; the moon; The frogs croak in the weeds. A bat wriggles down across Gold disk to silver reeds. The distant light of lamps. The whirr of winnowing grain. The peace of loneliness. The scent of imminent rain. (Seth, <i>All You Who Sleep Tonight</i> 31)</p>
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Swajathi 15

So, over here we have come to that line, let us take “Ceasing Upon The Midnight.” So, when we read “Ceasing Upon The Midnight,” we are actually reminded of John Keats fine and this “Ceasing Upon The Midnight” has been taken from *The Humble Administrator’s Garden* where, “to cease upon/ the midnight under the live oak/ seems too derisory a joke,/ he sleeps. His sleep is sound fine.”

So, here he sleeps. But there actually through you know through the winged chariot, you know, a drowsy numbness pains my sense or when we read “Ode to Nightingale,” then you can also find. So, but here again on the other hand “Night in Jiangning”--, “a glass of tea, the moon,/ the frogs croak in the weeds, a bat/ wriggles down across gold disk to/ silver reeds. /The distant light of lamps,/ the whirr of winnowing grain. /The peace of loneliness,/ the scent of imminent rain.” So, there are quite a good number of memorable

lines, we can go on and on. But, then all we have to realize is that Vikram Seth is a diasporic writer whether as a poet or a novelist.

(Refer Slide Time: 36:24)

“Unclaimed”

*To make love with a stranger is the best.
There is no riddle and there is no test.-*

*To lie and love, not aching to make sense
Of this night in the mesh of reference.*

*To touch, unclaimed by fear of imminent day,
And understand, as only strangers may.*

*To feel the beat of foreign heart to heart
Preferring neither to prolong nor part.*

*To rest within the unknown arms and know
That this is all there is; that this is so.*

To make love with a stranger is the best.
There is no riddle and there is no test –
To rest within the unknown arms and know
That this is all there is; that this is so.
VIKRAM SETH

Swajati 16

And, you know one another poem named “Unclaimed.”. See the title of the poem “Unclaimed.” Here, actually the theme is that whatever is around you, you must actually rejoice, you must actually make a meaning out of it. And, the poet says: “To make love with a stranger is the best,/ there is no riddle and there is no test/ to lie and love, not aching to make sense of this night in the mesh of reference./To touch unclaimed by fear of imminent day/ and understand as only strangers may/ to feel the beat of foreign heart to heart,/ preferring neither to prolong nor part,/ to rest within the unknown arms and know /that this is all there is that this is so.”

So, the last lines are actually quite symbolic where the poet actually wants to assimilate himself through what he has and that is why he says--- to love a stranger is the best, to love a stranger is the best; because there is no riddle and there is no test you know. So, from the practical affairs of the world, let us actually transport ourselves to a different imaginary world where you are in love with strange things or stranger, to rest with the unknown. So, this unknown can stand for unknown arms, can stand not only for the beloved’s arms, but also for the other country where the poet actually lives in and know that this is all there is. So, there is a sort of cosmopolitanism. So, the poet tries to become

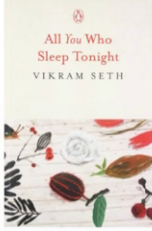
a cosmopolitan fine and as a cosmopolitan what he says, that this is all there is that this is so. So, whatever is present you have actually to enjoy.

(Refer Slide Time: 38:29)

“All You Who Sleep Tonight”

*All you who sleep tonight
Far from the ones you love,
No hands to left or right,
And emptiness above –*

*Know that you aren't alone.
~~The whole world shares your tears,~~
Some for two nights or one,
And some for all their years.*



The slide features a blue header with the title "All You Who Sleep Tonight" in white. Below the title is the poem's text in italics. The first stanza is followed by a second stanza where the line "The whole world shares your tears," is crossed out with a red line, and the following two lines are underlined in red. To the right of the text is a small image of the book cover, which has a light beige background with a pattern of various fruits and vegetables. At the bottom of the slide, there is a dark blue footer containing a small logo on the left and the number "17" on the right.

And, then again as I have been saying here and again there is a poem “All You Who Sleep Tonight”. So, those of you who are sleeping tonight. So, sleep here is a bit metaphorical, my dear friends because, Vikram Seth was not only parodying, but he was also trying to create a sort of pastiche.

“All you who sleep tonight/ far from the ones you love,/ no hands to left or to right/ and emptiness above./

So, he talks about the transitory nature of this world, you know, that life is transitory. Know that you are not alone, if you simply have the feeling of loneliness and the bouts of, you know boredom, envy, whatsoever please think that you are not only the one.

“The whole world shares your tears,/ some for two nights or one/ and some for all their years.” Let us repeat the lines in order to understand the essence of it, to grab the essence rather know that you are not alone, the whole world shares your tears, some for two nights or one and some for all their years.

So, your stay--- your presence is very important, do not think that you are the only one having the feeling of alienation, dislocation, disappointment, dejection, deprivation and many more. There are many others like you, perhaps you have not been able to see them.

So, all you who sleep tonight please get up and realize this is the time to realize, this actually makes Vikram Seth a very relevant poet .my dear friend.

Because, he can be considered to be a liberal humanist, he is not the one who can only be considered to think only of India, but he is a man who actually considers the entire world as one platform, as a global villager whatsoever. Because, his liberal attitude can be seen in the lines that you can find here which have been brought before you and let me read those lines in order to make myself also having a sort of satisfaction as to what sort of poet Vikram Seth was.

(Refer Slide Time: 40:50)

His Liberal attitude

Beasts of the forest and voracious wolves
Who hasten to spill innocent blood and kill
The pious and the upright.
Read these words
But think of the Moses words, the man of God
Sign aloud, O you nations of his people
For He avenges the blood of his servants, and
Renders revenge upon his adversaries. (AYWAST, 164)

“Beasts of the forest and voracious wolves,/

See--- “Beasts of the forest and voracious wolves/ who hasten to spill innocent blood and kill.” So, at times he used to speak the truth--- “who hasten to spill innocent blood and kill/ the pious and the upright,/ Read these words,/ but think of the Moses words, the man of God,/ sign aloud, O you nations of his people/ for He avenges the blood of his servants and/ renders revenge upon his adversaries.”

So, here we can find actually a note of resignation, you know. A note of disillusionment with all sorts of loves that are around us, but please remember that all those people who are trying to create chaos in this world should actually realize that they should actually think of the words of the Moses, the man of God and sign aloud, you nations of his

people you nations of the people for he avenges the blood of his servants, fine and renders revenge upon his adversaries.

So, all you who all you who sleep tonight they must actually get up, get up with a sense of realization my dear friend. So, we have already talked about and seen some of the essential features of his poem. We can always find and explore that how in a very lightness of wit Vikram says everything that he wants to convey.

Of course, there are autobiographical echoes, but then in those autobiographical echoes lies Indian sentiments and Indians feelings of the loss that he had. He is actually a poet of many traditions and you know since Vikram combines in himself so many genres, once when if he is asked what genre actually suits him the most? He will always say poetry, poetry and poetry.

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The slide is titled "Features of His Poetry" in a blue header. Below the title is a bulleted list of features: Cultural- hybridity, Continuity of style, Cultural and psychological conflict, Autobiographical elements, Lightness of wit, Conversational Tone, Indian society in background, and A poet of many traditions. To the right of the list is a blue rounded rectangle containing a quote: "Poetry. Always poetry. I have written lyric poetry throughout my career. The books appear sporadically, but that is only because composing poems to form a book takes a number of years" - Vikram Seth. At the bottom left of the slide are logos for Swajal and a circular emblem. At the bottom right is the number 19.

“Poetry. Always poetry./ I have written lyric poetry/ throughout my career. The/ books appear/ sporadically, but that is only/ because composing poems to form/ a book takes a number of years.”

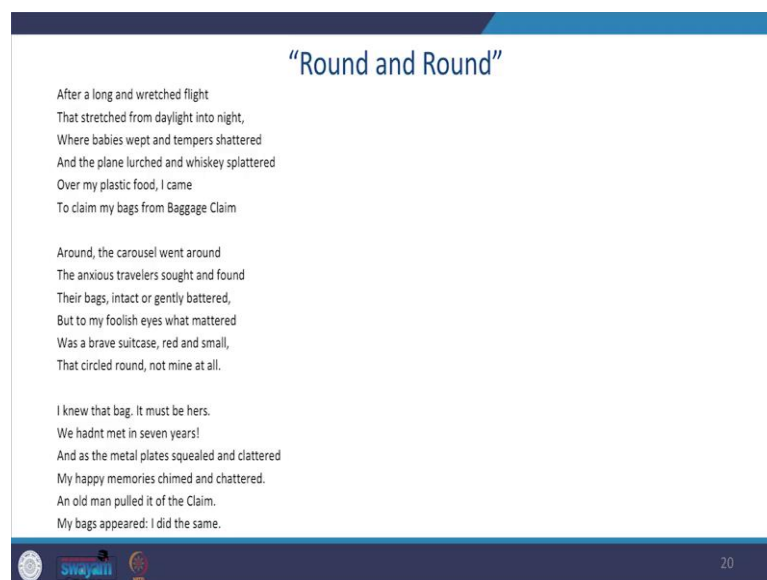
And, that is why what he talks about his own art, that is why what he talks about his own creativity. We can also take some more lines because you know I am so much tempted to recite the lines of Vikram Seth, because there is a sort of, even you know, even in the iteration. And, you will you must notice that one very significant quality or characteristic

with Vikram Seth is that he never repeats, he has actually such a myriad of themes with him that he will all.

And, in a way he actually has his eyes and ears open to every subject because, he is an observer. He never took up any job, he is a dedicated creative writer and that is why there was a time when his parents told him to take up a job in order to make his own livelihood. He said no and he simply wanted that his parents would support, actually his mother you know his mother Leela Seth was the first female judge. But then you cannot find in Vikram Seth any arrogance or whatsoever, he is very simple, very mixing.

He mixes memory with desire, there is doggerel, there is banality, there is sentimentality, there is romanticism, but then there is also a quest for life, for the love that he has lost.

(Refer Slide Time: 44:37)



“Round and Round”

After a long and wretched flight
That stretched from daylight into night,
Where babies wept and tempers shattered
And the plane lurched and whiskey splattered
Over my plastic food, I came
To claim my bags from Baggage Claim

Around, the carousel went around
The anxious travelers sought and found
Their bags, intact or gently battered,
But to my foolish eyes what mattered
Was a brave suitcase, red and small,
That circled round, not mine at all.

I knew that bag. It must be hers.
We hadn't met in seven years!
And as the metal plates squealed and clattered
My happy memories chimed and chattered.
An old man pulled it of the Claim.
My bags appeared: I did the same.

20

Here we can take one poem entitled “Round and Round,”. Look at the title of the poem “Round and Round.” “After a long and wretched flight/ that stretched from daylight into night, / where babies wept and tempered shattered/ and the plane lurched and whiskey splattered/ over my plastic food, I came/ to claim my bags from baggage claim./

He actually talks about an air journey and he has come to take up his bag from the baggage claim. And, there now see suddenly he actually “around the carousel went around/ the anxious travelers sought and found/ their bags intact or gently battered,/ but

to my foolish eyes what mattered /was a brave suitcase red and small/ that circle round,
not mine at all.”

So, suddenly his eyes fell upon a round red round suitcase which was not his, but let us look at his inclination towards something and towards color, towards the position, towards the memory that could have been very close to him. And, then in the last stanza he says---“ I knew that bag, it must be hers./ We had not met in seven years/ and as the metal plates squealed and clattered/ my happy memory chimed and chattered,/ an old man pulled it off the claim,/ my bags appeared I did the same.”

So, the poem is very much associated with memory and this may be a memory of his own beloved or somebody’s beloved or this may be a memory of something past, a past reverie or whatever. But then out of it and finally, he says----- my bags appeared, I did the same, my origins fine, my bag, my belongingness. So, all these have been conveyed very beautifully by Vikram Seth in this poem. So, having discussed the major qualities of Vikram Seth’s poetic oeuvre, we can now estimate Vikram as a poet.

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As a Poet

- Vikram Seth assimilates many traditions and cultures.
- He mixes doggerel, parody, banality, romanticism and sentimentality.
- He is essentially a poet who explores the theme of love and relationship in great detail.
- He brings historical and personal to textual harmony, mixing modern and Victorian.
- A master of lyricism and narrative structures, blending humor and irony at times.
- He “attempt to translate the sounds of music into the written word.”
- Once Khushwant Singh predicted that Seth would become a Nobel laureate.

“There is so much poetry that one reads which really doesn’t move or enlighten one at all. I’m not surprised that people are turning away from poetry.”

21

Vikram assimilates many traditions as we have seen, that he is not confined only to India. He mixes many cultures, there is actually a commingling of doggerel, parody, banality, romanticism and sentimentality. He is actually a poet who tries to assimilate different cultures, different colors, fine, and he brings both historical and personal fine.

He actually mixes modernity with Victorianism and as regards lyricism, if one thing that you can love Vikram for is his lyrical quality fine.

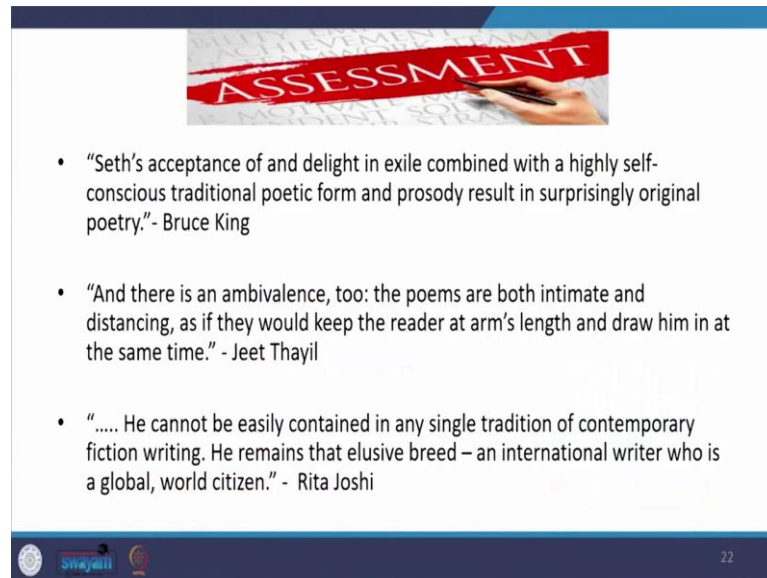
Even a diasporic poet writing lyrically fine, that is an advantage over other diasporic writers. He attempts to translate the sounds of music into the written word, of course. He has been criticized at times fine. But, then there are also people who have supported him and at one point of time Khushwant Singh has advocated and said that Seth would become a Nobel laureate.

But, at the same time another famous critique named C. D. Narasimhaiah had said that in Vikram Seth you can find the Americanization of an Indian scholar of an Indian poet.

Now, if Vikram is so much stepped in poetry and musicality, it is actually very pertinent to take one line where he says---“ There is so much poetry that one reads which really does not move or enlighten one at all. I am not surprised that people are turning away from poetry.” So, Vikram also rued the loss of readers of poetry, but at the same time he says that there is so much poetry that one reads which really does not move or enlighten.

But my dear friend, here in defense of Vikram Seth we must say that Vikram’s poetry moves, enlighten, delights and does not transport us to a world of despair rather he actually takes us, pulls us from the despair to delight. There are also people, I mean critics who have actually given a lot of bouquets to Vikram Seth and his poetic creativity or talent. In this regard Bruce King, who did one book on *Modern English Poetry*.

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The slide features a header with the word "ASSESSMENT" in white capital letters on a red banner. Below the banner is a photograph of a hand holding a pen over a document. The main content consists of three bullet points, each followed by a quote and the name of the critic. At the bottom of the slide, there are logos for Swajathi and a small number "22".

- “Seth’s acceptance of and delight in exile combined with a highly self-conscious traditional poetic form and prosody result in surprisingly original poetry.” - Bruce King
- “And there is an ambivalence, too: the poems are both intimate and distancing, as if they would keep the reader at arm’s length and draw him in at the same time.” - Jeet Thayil
- “..... He cannot be easily contained in any single tradition of contemporary fiction writing. He remains that elusive breed – an international writer who is a global, world citizen.” - Rita Joshi

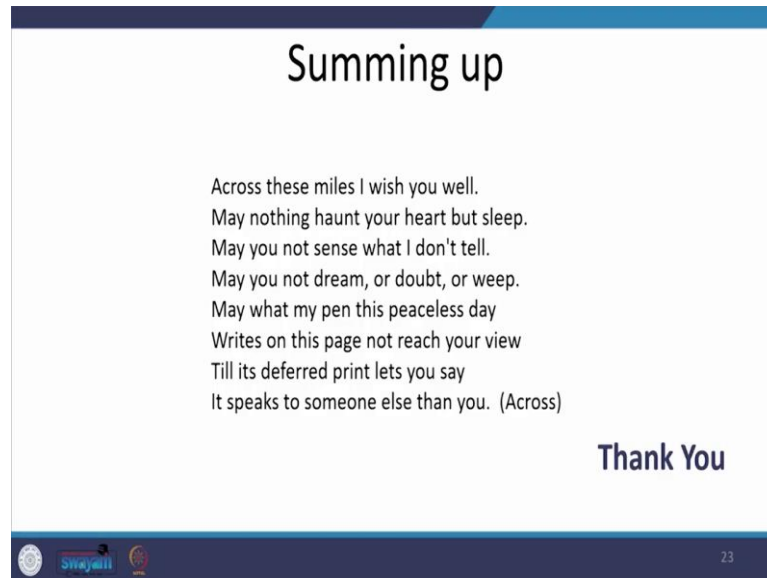
He says--- “Seth’s acceptance of and delight in exile combined with a highly self-conscious traditional poetic form and prosody result in surprisingly original poetry.” Fine? So, Vikram’s poetry is very original because, Vikram does not rue the loss rather he actually tries to move out of it and he tries to discover. He discovers because the love that he has lost, the identity that he has lost and when the world is changing we have to recreate ourselves. We have to create a new identity because that is actually the go of the world, that is actually the reality of the world.

Jeet Thayil, another contemporary poet says--- “ And there is an ambivalence,too:”. You have also found that there is an ambivalence. “ The poems are both intimate and distancing.” So, on the one hand we talk of love, on the other hand we talk of lost love as if they would keep the reader at arm’s length and draw him in at the same time. And, in one of the papers Rita Joshi says, ‘he cannot be easily contained in any single tradition that is actually beauty, that is the beauty of Vikram Seth.

He is so much diversified, you know. So, diversity thy name is Vikram Seth; let me tell this fine. So, he cannot be easily contained in any single tradition of contemporary fiction writing. He remains that elusive breed, an international writer who is a global world citizen. So, my dear friends, having discussed several aspects and nuances of Vikram Seth’s poetry, it is now time to wind up this lecture.

But, before we wind up this lecture, let us take one poem which in a way summarizes Vikram Seth's attitude, Vikram Seth's intelligence and Vikram Seth's understanding of the new world that is there. There is a sense of loss, but in the loss as I have been saying in some of my lectures; in the loss, there is a gain and how is that gain, let us look at these lines and read these lines.

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The slide features a dark blue header with the title "Summing up" in white. Below the title, a poem is centered in black text. At the bottom right of the slide, the words "Thank You" are written in a bold, dark blue font. The footer of the slide is dark blue and contains the Swayam logo, the text "Swayam", and the number "23".

Summing up

Across these miles I wish you well.
May nothing haunt your heart but sleep.
May you not sense what I don't tell.
May you not dream, or doubt, or weep.
May what my pen this peaceless day
Writes on this page not reach your view
Till its deferred print lets you say
It speaks to someone else than you. (Across)

Thank You

23

“Across these miles I wish you well,
May nothing haunt your heart, but sleep.
May nothing haunt your heart, but sleep;
May you not sense what I do not tell.
Here is actually the anguish of an immigrant,
May you not sense what I do not tell.
May you not dream or doubt or weep.
May what my pen this peaceless day,
Writes on this page not reach your view,
till its deferred print lets you say,
it speaks to someone else than you.”

Now, see the beauty; in these lines he is not only talking of the miseries of a man who has been distanced. But, in these lines he is also we can also find the prayers of a heart for a heart that is no more now, the prayers of a longing heart for a heart that is lost. In these lines we can find the yearnings of a person across the seas for his countrymen who cannot feel the sort of misery, the sorrow, the frustration, the delight, the despair, the disillusionment and the dejection.

But, at the same time a new delight that is actually preoccupying the entire world and its citizens. So, my dear friend, by saying all this we may now conclude that Vikram Seth is one of the most significant voices of Indian diasporic, especially Indian English diasporic poetry and hence he is the most relevant.

Let us remember Vikram Seth not only as a novelist, but also as a poet who actually represents the feelings of all people who are distanced by time, who are distance by boundaries, who are distance by cultures. But, do we have a different world today? We actually live in a world where all the cultures culminate together, where all the cultures meet and create a new world that is the global world.

Thank you very much. I wish you all a good night.