

Lingering Memories in Vikram Seth's *Two Lives*

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Memories play a vital role in everyone's lives. As people grow up they pass through different stages in their lives. Though many events, places and people pass through, certain things remain fresh in the memory. When pleasant memories are recalled, the mind gets refreshed. Memories of long last dear ones are very much precious to be preserved. The present paper analyses the role of long lasting memories in the early life of the author and the lives of the protagonist couple, Shanti Seth and Henny Caro in the memoir *Two Lives*, authored by the internationally famed writer Vikram Seth.

Many authors have commemorated their parents. Perhaps, no author, until now, has written a whole long memoir commemorating a great uncle and a great aunt. But Vikram Seth has made a difference through his memoir which deals with the life of his uncle and aunt. In *Two Lives*, the lives of Vikram Seth's uncle Shanty and aunt Henny are dealt with. They have spent most of their adult lives in a quiet suburban street in Hendon, where Shanty Seth had a dental practice.

The narrator is sent as a school boy to England in 1969 from Calcutta to be under the care of his uncle, Shanti Seth an Indian and his German Jewish wife Henny. Seth narrates the *Two Lives* of Shanti and Henny, and also provides a considerable amount of first person information about himself, his relationship with his great aunt and uncle, which forms the background to his own writing process for both *Two Lives* and his various other works.

The narrator, the author himself, lives a life in his memories. The other characters are introduced through his memories. Memories come to him in bits and pieces, as he recollects how he reached 18, Queens Road, Hedon, London, the residence of Shanti and Henny. Seth comments, "When I was seventeen I went to live with my great uncle and great aunt in England. He was Indian by origin, she a German. They were both sixty I hardly knew them at the time" (3).

Many authors in Indian Literature have presented the theme of travel in their works. Vikram Seth is no exception. In all of his works, one could find his vast knowledge about the places he has visited. In *Two Lives* he, as a character, travels from one place to another physically

as well as psychologically. The whole work is a long story of travels having jokes of compassionate realism.

The author has dedicated his endless potentialities and cognizant of the quality of his experience, to the readers. Vikram Seth's *Two Lives* is a work centered on questions of expatriate diasporic identity. The non-fictional narrative is set mostly in Germany and England, which chronicles the lives of two relatives of Seth, across the second two thirds of the twentieth century.

A Suitable Boy has a family at the centre of its narrative, but in the case of *Two Lives* it may be noted that the plot does not highlight on the extended Indian families but on the lives of two very different individuals with different nationalities. Vikram Seth has stayed with his uncle Shanti and Henny, when he first came to England as a student in 1969. Both Shanti and Henny have crossed sixty years now. Vikram Seth, the narrator is affectionately called by his family and friends as Vicky.

Seth himself indicates at several points in *Two Lives* about his family especially about his grandmother Chanda whom he called "Amma" who taught him Hindi. His grandfather Raj is a railway engineer and Seth's father Prem is a supervisor at the Bata shoe factory, Leila Seth, Vikram Seth's mother aims higher and becomes a high court judge. Vikram Seth has a sister named Aradhana, married to Peter Launsky Tieffenthal, a young Australian diplomat. He also has a younger brother named Shantum, who also spent much time at Shanti's home as a student but never took the couple with the same enthusiasm of Seth.

In the beginning, the narrator has had no thought of staying with his uncle Shanti and aunt Henny. This is due to Shanti's emotion and Henny's colour features. So he says in Hindi, "I don't like it here, I want to go home" (5). The boarding school at Tonbridge, in London, has changed his ambition. He has chosen English literature from other subjects like other emigrant students. Finding hard to adjust with language, he is safeguarded and taken care by Shanti and Henny. Henny taught him German because she is a Jewish German. Vikram Seth says, "Aunt Henny began to speak to me in the language 'was ist das, Vicky? She asked, pointing at a picture, and I had respond, Das ist ein Bild, Tante Henny'. I didn't much care for the sound of the language" (10).

Later the narrator is treated like a companion, not like a guest. Seth gets many friends from different places. He visits many like Rhine, Mosel and Zurich. In Zurich he suffers a lot. But surprisingly he meets Shanti and Henny there. When Seth attended interviews at Corpus Christi College and Oxford, they both get tensed. Finally Vikram Seth joins with his uncle and aunt. At

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that time Shanti shares some memories of his past and his wife's during Seth's visit. Thus he comes to know how Henny had lost her family in the Holocaust.

The early life of Shanti and Henny is very much smooth and comfortable. Henny is now living a moderately comfortable life with her mother Ella and sister Lola after the demise of her father. Shanti is living with his joint family in India in a good manner. Shanti leaves for England to study dentistry and while he is searching for lodging he is accommodated by Henny's mother. The time he spends as a lodger at Henny's home gives him a chance to get intimate with her at a slow pace. His attempt of purification of his territory by eradication of people whom he considered inferior brings about hardships in Henny's life as Jews were one among the groups considered inferior by Hitler. Her mother and sister perish in the concentration camps set up by Hitler. Being left alone, Henny longs for some emotional support. Shanti is the only one whom she could rely on. They both go together after facing many hardships.

Memories play a vital role in their lives as both Shanti and Henny relish their precious past which had served as a driving force in both their lives. Though they were childless, the couple is happy in each other's company. When young Vikram Seth goes to stay with them, he is taken care of in a good manner.

The affection given by his uncle and aunt take away the loneliness, the continuing consciousness of staying away from home, and it credits an exciting, sophisticated world to replace what he has been lost. This makes him write poems. This helps his mind to get deviated from studies.

The visit to China in 1980 make Seth write *From Heaven Lake*, because the travel to China was Seth's dream. The time Seth had spent with his great uncle and aunt is fresh in his mind though time has passed by. The very memory of both enthrall him, as they share an emotional bond with him. The writer within Vikram Seth is groomed by them.

Most of Vikram Seth's days in England are spent with his uncle and aunt; his uncle share his days in the British army, during the Second World War. Suddenly one day Shanti became sick, and he is taken care by Henny and Seth. In the mean time he loses his grandmother Amma, and Ira, who is referred to as Sister Ira. He says, "Three children of theirs had in infancy form, genetic causes, and they had no dared to have any more Ira was a child whom my parents had borne for them given to them in adoption within a few days of birth" (36). Memories of Amma and Ira linger in the mind of Shanti. The time he had spent with them is something very much pleasant and memorable, as they had given him love and solace in abundance. It also reminds him of his life in India. Vikram Seth too shares similar emotions regarding the two ladies.

As a budding writer, Seth struggles hard to establish himself as a writer. After much loss and struggle, he published *The Golden Gate* in New York by Random House. He got eleven thousand dollars for the same. This enabled him to clear his debts. He discontinued his studies and wished to return to his country. His main aim was to write a novel with an Indian background. When he was in India, Seth heard the news from Shanti Uncle that Aunt Henny is dying. Reaching London, Seth found a lean and sick Henny, who was moving to mortality, Dr. Murphy asked Shanti to give her Morphine, allowing Henny to die. But he disagreed. The love Shanti had for Henny is something great. He wanted to be by her side throughout her life and all through her hardships. Though the disease that struck Henny ended her life, the bond of love shared by the couple remained fresh. Henny died on Friday 7 April 1989, Sunday. Henny's funeral took place in Golders green Crematorium. "We come alone and we die alone" "They friendly lady" (46). Vikram Seth says about Henny:

Aunt Henny, 'I know that if you had allowed us to inform your friends, this chapel would have been full. But you didn't want it, so here are the thereof us, uncle, colin and I. You used to call me your husband's nephew, but occasionally you slipped up. (47).

After the publication of *A Suitable Boy*, Seth went to Shanti's home again to spend his days with him. Seth's family also went with him. During their stay there, Seth's mother suggested to write about Uncle Shanti and aunty Henny. Seth had taken eleven languish interviews over five months between June and October 1994. The interviews gave Vikram Seth an opportunity to understand the lives of Shanti and Henny. In addition to the interviews, the letters and photographs that Shanti and Henny shared during their life time, contributed much in the narrator's creation of *Two Lives*. The letters and photographs were the remains of the lingering past Shanti and Henny had relished upon. When Seth was going through the letters he realized:

. . . how rich the material was, so rich in fact it provided me with an image of Aunty Henny at least as acute as that of Shanti uncle. Her friends write to her and through the tone of their words create a sense both of their Personality and hers. She writes to them, speaking in a voice that recreates her presence, and she says things she never said to uncle. She talks with pain and clarity about the very matters I would have found it impossible, had she been alive to broach. (205)

Two Lives gives thought of love, where Henny and Shanti's story takes the central concern. Nostalgia plays a vital role in the lives of the protagonists. A bunch of letters exchanged between Shanti and Henny help Seth in the successful recreation of the essence of love, discovered after their death through the letter communication between Shanti and Henny. Seth's

exhilarated outburst at the discovery of Henny's letters and his absolute faith in their accuracy is clear.

Henny maintains the habit of letter writing in order to be in touch with her family and friends. However, it initiates a discourse upon the adequacy of epistolary narrative for the purpose of writing biography. The letters are sent and received during various stages in her life. The letters are filled with emotional bonding between the sender and the receiver. A clear picture of her life could be understood by having a closer reading of the letters and Vikram Seth's understanding of Henny's life has contributed much to the making of the memoir.

Shanti loved Henny to a very great extent. He had destroyed every object which reminded him of his late wife. But those letters were left unnoticed. Through the letters, much could be understood about Aunt Henny's life by Vikram Seth. Though the world has many modern means of communication today, letter writing was once the commonest means of communication. Letters written to and received from friends and relatives were very much close to the heart, as they had a personal nostalgic touch. Such were the recovered letters of Henny which she received from her relatives and friends.

The role of memories in relishing long last relationships is very much important. The beauty of familial bonding could be easily understood by having a closer reading of *Two Lives*. It is indeed the tale of two people who had come together in life amidst great difficulties and personal losses. The author's recollection of events in their lives through his *Two Lives* is truly a gift to the world of literature.

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