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Espousing the Strange and the Familiar: Vikram Seth's *Two Lives*

When Vikram Seth undertakes to write the biography of his German-trained dentist uncle and his Berlin-born Jewish aunt who both look upon him as their son during his exile in London, he is far from imagining the complexities that this personal journey into the coexistence of the foreign and the familiar in his family will unravel. The confrontation between the Same and the Other on the world scene in the form of imperialism, nazism, holocaust and the unresolved conflict between Israel and Palestine constitutes the background to his book. His masterfully told tale of two survivors of a violent century holds lessons of peace for the more dangerous century in which we live.

Like the pictorial genre of the double portrait that emerged during the Renaissance, double biography, whether in the form of fiction like Carol Shields's *Happstance* (1980) which was published in a back-to-back format obliging the reader to choose between the wife's story and the husband's, or in the form of memoirs like Bharati Mukherjee and Clark Blaise's *Days and Nights in Calcutta* (1977), is a new literary subgenre that has enriched the repertoire of postcolonial literature. Nancy Huston's *Le Journal de la création* (1988)¹ or Le Clézio's *Diego and Frida* (1993) focusing on the life of artist couples are two striking examples of this trend in French. The double biography is to be distinguished from the two phases of one person's life or the double lives of the same person, indeed even the lives of twins commonly described in the biographic genre. In the double biography, the couple becomes the symbol of a new and transformed selfhood that combines familiarity with foreignness and intimacy with universality. Vikram Seth's *Two Lives* (2005) portrays a married couple, one of whom is a relative and another a stranger. While trying to reconstruct their troubled lives in extraordinarily difficult times, Seth pierces through the silence that his foreign aunt Henny has surrounded herself with as a shield to protect herself from the agony and grief of losing her mother and sister to concentration camps, and the betrayal by her unofficial fiancé and her frivolous brother. He is, however, unable to reconcile himself to the senility of his maternal great-uncle Shanti whose damaging comments about his niece and whimsical testament, cutting the near and the dear out of inheritance, alienate him from this surrogate father figure. The mutation of the familiar into the foreign and

¹ I would like to thank Professor Marta Dvorak and Dr. Christine Lorre for drawing my attention to the Canadian examples.

friend into foe and vice versa and the unsettling impact of this moral ambivalence on human existence are a constant preoccupation in this documentary narrative which attempts to take the measure of hatred and violence that set in motion the major events of the twentieth-century through the prism of two ordinary lives. Otherness is explored here in terms of what Paul Ricoeur (1990) calls *ipse* identity, in other words, alterity within and across subjects, marriage, exile and disability.

Two Lives can be first viewed as an extension of the cluster of texts that Seth himself and his mother have offered to the public, i.e. *A Suitable Boy*, a novel by Vikram Seth (1997), *On Balance, An Autobiography* by Leila Seth (2003) where we encounter some of the characters and discover some of the events and photographs found in this book. The biographical instinct seems to run in the Seth family, as Kunj Behari Seth, a member of the author's maternal family had published as early as 1899 a *History of the Seth Family of Biswan* in Urdu, to which he added an English version entitled *Seths of Biswan* in 1906. Vikram Seth wrote his book on the suggestion of his mother in 1994, when he was wondering what to write about after his libretto *Arion and Dolphin*, commissioned by the English National Opera. The eleven long oral interviews he conducted with his uncle are counterbalanced in the text by the translation of the letters written in German and English by his aunt. The dedication to the book calls it a "half filial endeavour" to record the "complex graph of love" that existed between two survivors of the horrors of holocaust and the devastation of the Second World War. The geography of pain thus retraced is intended to emphasize the significance of *Lezikaron*, a Hebrew concept which stresses the importance of looking forward as well as remembering the past.

The Indo-Jewish connection is two thousand years old. Jewish presence in India dates back to Nebuchadnezzar. Like Parsees, Jews constitute only a small religious minority in India. The Jewish population of India consists of three main communities: Bene Israel, Cochini and Baghdadi. Besides there are Ashkenazi Jews and a community in Manipur which claims to be Jewish and calls itself Bene Menashe.² Initially the representative Jewish voice in Indian writing in English was undoubtedly the poet Nissim Ezekiel's. Esther David, who hails from the Bene Israel community, has written novels (2003, 2006), short stories (2001) and a scholarly essay (2002) on Jewish costumes

² The Jewish people in British services in India such as the Viceroy Lord Reading (1921-26) and the two thousand refugees who escaped from anti-Semite European nations in the 1930s and the 1940s and arrived in India have also left their imprint on Indian culture. Officially India established formal diplomatic relations with Israel in 1992, though it had recognized Israel as a state in 1950. There exists a privileged relationship between Non-Resident Indians in the US and Americans of Jewish origin. Young Israeli soldiers returning from compulsory military service and its gruesome realities find refuge on the shores of Goa. For more details, consult <http://www.haruth.com/AsianIndia.html>

in India. The coming of Jews to India, their settlement in Cochin and Bombay and their return to Israel in recent times have also been dealt with by authors such as Salman Rushdie (1995) and Anita Desai (1988). Shauna Singh Baldwin's latest novel *The Tiger Claw* (2004) focuses on the transcultural love story between Noor Inayat Khan, a noblewoman from an Indian Sufi Muslim family settled in France and Armand, her Jewish lover, for whose sake she consents to work as a spy for the British. What sets Vikram Seth's book apart is the beauty of survival portrayed in the account, the triumph of hope offered by compassion and devotion across racial, national, religious and cultural divides, the dignity of hard work and the perspective of peace denoted in the protagonist's very name.

Divided into four parts, *Two Lives* starts with an exposition of the author's connection to the main characters. He is introduced to them first at age two and a half when he does not take to them, then again at age nine when he unknowingly tells his aunt that Adolph Eichmann was an "evil, horrible man" (Seth, 2005: 7) after reading an article about him in *Life* and finally at age seventeen when he comes to live with them to finish his schooling in Tonbridge. The connection is prolonged through his undergraduate days at Oxford. Even if the narrator chooses to shift to Stanford to do his doctoral thesis and travels to China to collect data, he flies back to London to be present at his aunt's deathbed in 1989. Part Two narrates the story of Shanti uncle's education and training as a dentist in Berlin in the 1930s, his being a boarder in Gabriele Caro's house, his exile and subsequent requalification in Edinburgh and resettlement in London after serving in the British army and losing his right arm. Part Three is devoted to the buried past of Helga Gerda Caro and her family. Vikram Seth tries to fathom what made Henny marry Shanti and how she coped with loss. This part would not have been possible but for the accidental discovery of Henny's treasured documents in a forgotten trunk in the family attic after her death, which give a sense "of depth, a perspective, an intimacy and a kind of psychological and moral connection" (Shaikh, 2005). Part Four describes the drawn-out end of Shanti Uncle's life. The metanarrative comments by Vikram Seth on his role as "an anomalous third braid, sometimes visible and sometimes not" explain why he could not follow the chronological order. "It would have made little sense to ricochet from one protagonist to the other through their first two decades, before they had even met" (491). His concerns for the larger humanity override his moral dilemma about rendering the private documents of his aunt public.

When Vikram Seth goes to live with his Uncle and Aunt in 1969, he looks upon his uncle's house as a family anchor in a foreign land. But it is there he learns to appropriate the foreignness of the German tongue, as he has to be "force-fed" four or five years of German learning in six months because regulations for entrance to Oxford university require a second European

language. Aunt Henny stoutly takes over as mediator and starts teaching him German, conversing with him and singing in German, while he washes the dishes and she dries them in the kitchen. Aunt Henny and Uncle Shanti quarrel only in German, which constitutes an inseparable bond between them. Shanti calls Vikram his *Söhnchen*. Later Seth travels to Germany, Austria and Switzerland and finds German-speaking people friendly and tolerant. They often refer to the *Indogermanische verbinding* (234). He learns to appreciate German authors such as Goethe, Trakl, Morgenstern, Hölderlin and Heine, and German composers such as Bach and Schubert, whose songs he sings. When his sister Aradhana marries an Austrian diplomat, he makes it a point to exchange a few words with his brother-in-law in German. His aunt who could never accept Shanti's relations as hers makes an exception in his case, and psychologically integrates him as "her nephew", thanks to his ability to speak to her in her mother tongue. In spite of these family links, when Seth spots the banality of the evil embodied in bureaucratic German while searching the Yad Vashem archives in Jerusalem, he trembles in anger and rudely turns down the innocent German teenager who volunteers to help with the translation. For Seth who has mastered languages both Eastern and Western, German alone seems to remain in the paradoxical realm of the endearingly repulsive, like the affectionate but foreign diminutives that dot his text. This uneasiness may have arisen from the unconscious guilt provoked by the knowledge of the darker side of the Indo-German connection, namely, the idea of Aryan superiority and the *Swastika* symbol which were borrowed from the Brahmin culture by Hitler.

Shanti's story is also one of confronting "the invincible singularity of the verbal body" (Derrida, 2005: 11) that a foreign language represents. When he chooses to study in Berlin after a trip to Paris and London, Shanti is disoriented by the foreignness of the lay of the land, the language and also the field of study, because he chooses to become a dentist not out of any innate love for the profession but out of necessity. Having been orphaned of his father before his birth as the eighth progeny, he is protected by his elder brother Raj, who advises him to become a dental surgeon rather than the engineer that he wants to be, due to his lack of talent in drawing. When he was born, Shanti's widowed mother wanted to give him a self-alienating name, 'Vipat Behari', the bringer of misfortune (57) before she was persuaded to call him Shanti Behari, the bringer of peace. The traumatic memory of the early rejection by his mother gives him the lucidity and strength to assume his exilic destiny as the racial other in Germany.

Once enrolled in the Friedrich Wilhelm Universität in Berlin, Shanti not only masters the German language, but also Latin. Learning a foreign language amounts to, in his case, adopting another origin (Kristeva, 2005). He is a boarder at the house of Gabriele Caro, a Jewish woman, but also befriends German people. In the early stages, he does not feel the xenophobic turn in

the atmosphere. However, he gets to see Hitler at close quarters and witnesses the gradual isolation, stigmatization and exclusion of Jews and generally non-Aryans by the Nazis. As a foreigner he is not permitted to practise in Germany and not even allowed to work as a research assistant to his professor. He therefore chooses to flee to Britain. As a colonial subject, Shanti prefers this detour to the fatherland instead of a return to the motherland so as to avoid interference from his own family.

While in England, Shanti keeps in touch with Henny, who has emigrated there, and courts her through letters. However, when the war breaks out, Shanti, who has got requalified in Edinburgh, is enlisted and sent to the Middle East and Italy. It is at Monte Cassino that his right arm gets blown off in an explosion. He learns to make documentary films and is recruited to lecture for the Amalgamated Dental Company. Despite his doubts about his ability to marry and support Henny, he does not wallow in self-pity but signs his letters to her “yours most unfortunate” echoing the original name his mother intended for him. His dentist friend Henry Edwards encourages him to operate with his left hand. Shanti is able to set up a separate practice for himself and buy a house in London – his first and true home. He thus succeeds in transforming the vulnerability of his otherness – his physical handicap – into an active life force. Seth constructs his uncle’s resilience and quiet success as efficient counterpoints to Nazi ideology which considered deficient human beings as superfluous and exterminated them, as Hannah Arendt has pointed out in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*.

The role of Henny in Shanti’s life is a result of the interplay of personal chemistry and the vicissitudes of history. When Shanti comes to call as a prospective boarder, Henny tells her mother “*Nimm den Schwarzen nicht*” (Don’t take the blackman, 81). It is as if in Shanti she saw a reflection of what Freud calls the disquieting strangeness (*das Unheimliche*) in herself. Henny is, at that time, unofficially engaged to Hans Mahnert, a polished, somewhat spoiled young man for whose father she works as a secretary. It is Henny’s sister Lola who secretly loves Shanti. However, Henny’s mother, who does not like Hans, has this strange intuition: “Even if you marry Hans, as long as Shanti is around, you will not starve” (95). Mahnert arranges for Henny to emigrate to England, where she works as a family help, nanny and secretary, and acquires a new-found English identity as “the friendly lady” (429).

Since Henny is tall, fair and attractive, her marriage to a short, black-skinned, disabled Indian in a foreign land, though thrice traumatic, is a form of feminist as well as Jewish resistance. Marriage is perhaps the most immediate experience in foreignness that adults go through. This is the case especially with the virilocal tradition in patriarchal societies where marriage means exile and uprooting from the family home for women. “The meaning of ‘home’ is a constantly evolving and fraught one that exists on the interstices of the familiar and the strange” to quote Amit Chaudhuri (1999).

The Third Reich passed some special marriage laws in keeping with its fascist ideology (268). Under the law of the Protection of German Blood and Honour of 1935, a *Mischling* (half breed) like Hans was permitted to marry another *Mischling* of the first degree to keep his status. If he had married a Jew like Henny, he would have been reclassified as a Jew. A *Mischling* of the second degree, which means he had one Jewish grandparent, was not even allowed to marry another *Mischling* of the second degree, but only a full blooded 'Aryan' so that no residue of Jewish blood could remain. Under a directive issued by Göring in 1938 after *Kristall Nacht*, Jews were not allowed to marry *Mischlings* of the second degree or Germans. The Jews who had been previously married to Germans found themselves in dire straits, if their partners had died or divorced. They became unprotected Jews. A mixed marriage was privileged, when the husband was German. If the wife was German and there were no children born of the marriage, or if any children were being brought up as Jews, their marriage was not privileged and they were excluded from the German community.

A *Mischling* of the first degree like Hans was allowed to marry a full-blooded Aryan with special permission. Hans decides to marry Wanda, a Catholic girl from Poland, in other words, a full-blooded Aryan. If he had married Henny and remained in Germany, they would have both been "murdered by the German state" (Seth, 2005: 269). What pains Henny most in the story is that Hans chooses to deny his Jewish heritage. Henny keeps a polite correspondence with his father but does not respond to Hans when he tries to explain his decision and professes unflinching love to her. She discusses her hurt rarely and in veiled terms with a very few friends, and never broaches the topic with Shanti, who continues to write to Hans. Indeed her muted hurt is the symbolic equivalent of Shanti's phantom hand, the memory of his lost arm, which gives him unceasing pain and despite which he has to live and work. "Each found in their fellow exile a home" as Vikram Seth puts it (403) and "a sense of belonging" in their work (404). Seth's conclusion brings to mind Julia Kristeva's affirmation:

The foreigner still considers work as a value. A vital necessity, to be sure, his sole means of survival, on which he does not necessarily place a halo of glory but simply claims as a primary right, the zero degree of dignity (Kristeva, 1988: 30).³

Henny, who has lost all peace, accepts Shanti, the bringer of peace, as husband. He is, of course, her sole link to her past. While Hans favours patriarchal values and whiteness, Henny chooses blackness to honour her mother. Shanti's disability allows her to confront "the anxiety of her own vulnerability, her own incapacity and the death of her own body or mind"

³ The English translation is by Léon S. Roudiez in Julia Kristeva. *Strangers to Ourselves*. New York: University of Columbia Press, 1991.

(Kristeva 2003, 33, my translation). Theirs is not a passionate love affair, but Shanti affectionately calls her Hennerle. She is his *kuckuck*, and he is Henny's *schwarze punkt* (black spot) and *pünktchen* (little spot, 125). While Shanti stubbornly maintains a tension between the *kuckuck* of his dreams and the *kuckuck* in flesh, Henny is equally steely in her resolve not to accept Shanti's relations as hers. She does not understand the typically Indian extended family ties and does not like it, when total strangers descend on her at any hour. She never wants to go to India because she is afraid of the germs, crowds and the stifling and engulfing family. Leila Seth finds her such a highly strung person that she decides against giving her son Shantum to be adopted by Shanti and Henny. Towards the end of the biography, Vikram Seth surmises that she might have had a lesbian relationship with a German friend called Eva in England. This sexual ambivalence further adds to Henny's already misinterpreted racial and cultural difference.

Henny's correspondence with her old friends reveal her attempts to trace her mother and sister. She keeps the memory of her mother and sister alive by preserving the photos, the Jewish Bible and the Jewish prayer book which belonged to her sister, who had worked in the *Gemeinde* (Jewish Community Organization), and most importantly the last postcards they send through the Red Cross to her in 1942 and a common friend in 1943 before they meet their inexorable fate in Theresienstadt and Birkanau respectively. She comes to know of her mother's death at age seventy, if not the exact circumstances of it, in October 1945. She, however, tries to trace Lola by placing a Missing Persons advertisement in the *Aufbau* in New York and by contacting various Jewish agencies in Britain. When her friends narrate the last phase of her mother's and sister's lives and tell her that she should not entertain hopes about her sister being alive, Henny gets *urticaria pigmentosa*. This psychosomatic illness is the only form of intolerance that she outwardly shows. Her attempt to seek compensation from the German state for lost property and damage to career could be seen as a gesture of overcoming the double bind of mourning at a distance and in delayed time, which constitutes the destinal difference of migrants.

Vikram Seth takes time to dwell on the notions of father-land, hometown and community. Franz Mahnert, when he arranges for the emigration of Henny, writes to her "The world is beautiful even outside your fatherland... You will soon find out how wonderfully one can live in another country, and that there are good people there as well" (109). Liberal-minded Jews had adopted Germany as their fatherland and Berlin as their hometown. But under the influence of Hitler, the name of their association founded in 1933 changed successively from The Reich Representation of German Jews (*Reichvertretung der deutschen Juden*) to Reich Representation of Jews in Germany in 1935 (*Reichsvertretung der Juden in Deutschland*) and Reich Association of Jews in Germany in 1935 (*Reichvereinerung der Juden in*

Deutschland). Despite this political disempowerment, this organization – like the Jewish Order Service set up in 1942 – unwittingly collaborates with the Gestapo in organizing the mass expulsion, deportation and murder of their members by collecting and sharing data. This illustrates what Theodore Lessing had identified in the 1930s as Jewish self-hatred, which arises out of the guilt of having brought misfortune on themselves. Henny, who was born and brought up in Berlin, comes to know that her former friends are separated by distance, poor transport, currency reforms, intersectoral passes, and finally by a wall in postwar Berlin. She revisits Germany in 1979, forty years after her departure. But the biographer is unable to ascertain whether she saw Berlin again.

Vikram Seth does not project himself as an unconditional champion of the cause of Israel. He does not want to overlook the fact that German Jewish scientists had ushered in the atomic age by harnessing the energy of the atom, and that German Jewish scholars like Marx and Engels had participated in the theoretical germination of Communism. Seth deplors the way Palestine was partitioned in 1948 much like India (357) and condemns Israel's attitude towards the Arabs of Palestine, while the Jewish prayer book exhorts them to remember the “unity of mankind, love their neighbour, protect their neighbour and his rights, be aware of his honour, honour his friends and assuage his sorrows” (191).

Forgiving turns out to be a difficult process for victims of irreparable violence. They remain torn like Derrida, between pure forgiveness which is impossible and the practical need for peace that forgiveness, however imperfectly, tries to satisfy (Derrida, *Pardoner*, 2005). Henny politely cuts off correspondence with Lili Fürth, a former friend who had become an apologist for Nazism during the War, and tactfully checks the background of Fred Götte before receiving him in London. Shanti's own political attitude towards Nazi Germany was “neither alliance nor dissociation” (101). He even gets the specification ‘Hindu Aryan’ mentioned in his 1938 British passport. Vikram Seth is annoyed at his uncle's cranky attitude towards his mother Leila because Shanti flippantly refers to her as Mack the Knife after a notorious character in *The Threepenny Opera*. He is further irritated by his cousin Arun's decision to organize a Hindu funeral ceremony for his secular uncle. The Gujarati accent of the Hindu priest seems to have reminded Vikram Seth of the burning of Muslims by Hindus in the state of Gujarat in postcolonial India.

Jacques Derrida has sustained the supposition that “All Nation States are born and founded in violence”, while discussing the issue of repentance, pardon and reconciliation (Derrida, 1999). The convulsions in the form of imperialism or nazism or racism or communalism that the 20th century had witnessed are but re-enactments of this original violence. One way of dealing with this violence would be to recognize the fact that “Strangely, the foreigner

lives within us: he is the hidden face of our identity, the space that wrecks our abode, the time in which understanding and affinity founder”, as Julia Kristeva remarks (Kristeva, 1988: 9).⁴ The tolerance of the enigmatic, enduring and inalterable part of the Other’s uncanniness demonstrated by Shanti and Henny, who “were so integrated” (47), is an edifying example not only for individuals but also groups in the more dangerous century in which we live, and in which terrorism and Islamophobia are ripping lives apart.

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⁴ English translation is by Léon S. Roudiez.

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