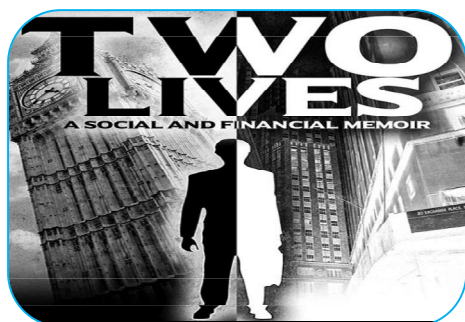




ISSN: 2249-894X  
 IMPACT FACTOR : 5.7631 (UIF)  
 UGC APPROVED JOURNAL NO. 48514  
 VOLUME - 8 | ISSUE - 8 | MAY - 2019



## TWO LIVES: HISTORY WRIT LARGE AND HISTORY WRIT LITTLE

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### ABSTRACT:

*Two Lives is a non-fiction family memoir written by Vikram Seth at the suggestion of his mother. It focuses on the lives of his great-uncle Shanti Behari Seth and German-Jewish great-aunt Henny Caro who met in Berlin in 1930s. This book sketches the biography of these two characters, as well as, contains autobiographical touches. Two Lives recounts true histories – at first parallel, later intertwined. Set in Germany and England the book narrates the history of a violent era seen through the eyes of the two survivors and an intimate, unforgettable portrait of a complex abiding love-tale. While recounting their lives against Holocaust, tumultuous Indian*

*history and 1970s England, Seth writes, "It is not only the lessons of history writ large and the avoidance of gross political errors that can be absorbed. It is also the lessons of history writ little that may be taken to heart - the sense that the acts and decisions of ordinary individuals, trivial or momentous, may lead, sometimes by imperceptible gradations, sometimes by sudden jolts, and not even always in the same direction, towards making the world a humane and reasonably secure home for all its denizens or a riven and uncertain place of grief and injustice, fear, hunger and pain." With this perception the memoir can also be read in the light of New Historicism Theory.*

*This paper is an attempt to study the memoir at two levels – first the history of the time and second the various aspects of multiculturalism, multilingualism and diasporic element as present in the two lives (of Shanti and Henny) documented by Vikram Seth.*

**KEYWORDS:** History, new historicism, biography, diaspora, multicultural, multilingual, hybrid genre.

### INTRODUCTION :

*Two Lives* deals with the lives of Vikram Seth's great-uncle, Shanti Behari Seth and German-Jewish great-aunt Henny Caro. Seth became acquainted with them when, at the age 17, he left Calcutta to study at Oxford. In this memoir, Seth recalls his affectionate feelings for the pair, while recounting their lives against the Holocaust,

tumultuous Indian history, and 1970s England. The two met when, Shanti studied dentistry in Berlin, where he lodged with Henny and her mother. Henny's first reaction was "**Nimm den Schwarzen nicht**' (Don't take the black man)" (*Two Lives*, 81). Shanti soon immigrated to Britain; Henny escaped Nazi Germany (the rest of her German-Jewish family perished in concentration camps). Reunited in England, they married years later in 1951, when both were 43 years old. *Two Lives* recounts their half

century relationship and the events that propelled two extraordinary lives. It is the true histories – at first parallel, later intertwined.

The memoir makes an interesting study, when it is read in the light of New Historicism Theory. New historicism deals with textuality of history. It aims simultaneously to understand the work through its historical context and to understand cultural and intellectual history. Michel Foucault based his approach both on his theory of the limits of collective cultural

knowledge and his technique of examining a broad array of documents in order to understand *episteme* of a particular time. Vikram Seth has also resorted on various documents, letters and other sources of basing his description to make it more authentic. New historicism is claimed to be a more neutral approach to historical events and to be sensitive towards different cultures. Abrams endorses the view of Greenblatt in this regard when he says, “the view that history, not the author shapes a literary work and forges its meaning is indeed a crucial feature....” (Shodhganga/Abrams, 365). We find the same trend in *Two Lives*.

First two parts of this narrative focuses on Shanti. Part three is Henny’s story which takes up the majority of the book. It consists largely of correspondences from before war until several years after. Hers is mostly a Holocaust story that tells as much about the culture of the time as the woman herself. Part four examines their marriage, and part five details a family mystery about Shanti’s will and Seth’s complex but beautifully lucid summation of his research into these lives. Throughout the book Seth explores the *macrocosm through the microcosm*, resulting in a most unusual story.

This story is not simply about them alone, it also carries the weight of personal biography of the author, although, through the prism of Seth’s family and that of aunt Henny. There are innumerable little details about Vikram’s siblings, parents and extended family. Vikram is a loving member of that close-knit family. Shanti, who was the brother of Seth’s maternal grandfather, belongs to the clan of the Seths of Biswan. Vikram deals with the immediate and extended family, his own growing up and development, in and out of the story, with elan. His love and affection for his father and mother, his sister, his brothers, his great-uncle and great-aunt, pervades the pages. In this sense, *Two Lives* is unusual: it talks about many factual matters of history and biography, but never loses the touch of personal effect. *Time Review* writes “Fortunately there is more to *Two Lives* than two lives. The structure of this book is part biography, part memoir and part history.” In a sense, *Two Lives* could have been called *Three Lives*. Vikram Seth, in an interview, puts it in this way: “It’s not three lives – the focus of the book is still basically on Shanti and Henny. The ideal title of the book would be in Hindi, because we have a word for it: dhai jeevan, two and a half lives” (Seth/*Masters*).

Seth is both the narrator of the story and the character within it. Through this memoir-cum-biography he “wants them (Shanti and Henny) completely remembered.” Seth writes further, “I want them to mark true” (Wikipedia). Relying on interviews and Henny’s gut wrenching letters written between 1940 to 1950 found in trunk in the attic after her death, Seth reinterprets war years, casting a sharp and clear eye on historical rumblings making these two worthy people “more famous in death than they could have dreamed of being while they lived” (*Times of India*). To quote Seth himself from an interview: “When you write about people who do not make any great impression on the history of the world (...), people who ‘rest in unvisited graves’, as George Eliot said, then you are free to dwell on those parts of their lives that a conventional biographer can’t” (*Observer*). So it is a biography or what Vikram Seth calls “history writ little,” (*Two Lives*, 348) of two middle class people whose lives appear striking because they lived through exceptional times that is the rise of Hitler, World War II, the Quit India Movement, Partition and Independence becoming the backdrop of the book, hence, it is also “history writ large” (*Two Lives*, 348).

Vikram Seth writes towards the end of the novel: “My lens has zoomed in for the most part on my two subjects. But occasionally it has become a wide-angle and touched upon the history of the century they inhabited.

It is true that centuries are arbitrary units – terminated, among other thing, by the miscalculated date of birth of the founder of a religion and the number of fingers on our hands – but because we invest these units with spurious significance, they take on true significance. Shanti and Henny’s lives were almost coeval with that arbitrary unit, the twentieth century. Both were born in 1908; Henny died in 1989, Shanti in 1998. Many of the great currents and movements of the century are reflected through the events of their lives and those of their friends and family: the Raj, the Indian freedom movement, post-independence India; the Third Reich; the Second World War; post-war Germany, ... the emigration of Jews from Germany in the 1930s (with some of Henny’s friends going as far afield as Shanghai, South Africa and California); the Holocaust.... I felt that a picture of these

individual lives would be complemented by glimpses of their century, even if these glimpses were mediated by the opinion, perhaps opinionatedness, of the author. Indeed, the lens has also turned around upon its wielder, for this book is memoir as well as biography" (*Two Lives*, 490-91).

It is also intensely analyzed history of Hitler's rise to power. Hitler became Chancellor of Germany. He quickly eliminated all positions to rule as sole leader. The Nazi Germany (1933 to 1935) is also known as Third Reich. The state idolized Hitler as its Fuhrer centralizing all the power in his hand making it a totalitarian state. Their motto was **Ein Volk, ein Reich, ein Fuhrer** (one people, one Reich, one leader).

Vikram Seth writes – "In 1873 there was a Stock market crash across Europe, which in Germany affected many members of the aristocracy and the middle class. There was a virulent outpouring of hatred against the Jews during the long recession that followed. It was at the end of this decade that the greatly respected Prussian historian Heinrich Von published an anti-Semitic essay that included the words to be so prominently displayed generations later in the huge banners of the Nazi rallies. 'The Jews are our misfortunes.' Thus, followed a long tradition- the excoriation of Jews, some of the most-poisonous of which stemmed from Martin Luther" (*Two Lives*, 194). During the era of Holocaust, German authority also targeted other groups of their perceived 'racial inferiority.'

History is not just what happens out on the world stage, it is personal and particular as well. Henny as a German-Jew was forced to exile in the 1930s and Shanti as a British colonial subject lost his arm ranged against by historical and personal circumstances in the service of a country that was ruling – and unwilling to relinquish his own. Nilanjana S. Roy writes her reaction to this aspect: "Indians fought in both the Great Wars, but that experience has rarely being captured in our literature ... By giving Shanti a voice Seth opens a window into the brown man's war."

Vikram Seth describes the harrowing War – "The German troops in Italy included some of their finest; they were led by Field-Marshal Kesserling, an excellent professional soldier. The Allies under General Alexander – British, Americans, Indians, Canadians, New Zealanders, French, and Poles – moved slowly up the west coast, taking the obstacles one by one. The most difficult of these was Monte Cassino. The Allies arrived here in early 1944, and got bogged down for many months, unable to advance. In some respects, the battles fought here recalled the gruelling warfare of the First World War.

*It was at Monte Cassino that Shanti lost his arm" (Two Lives, 145).*

Although aunt Henny and Shanti uncle were from very different backgrounds they had their situations as the products of dispersal and upheaval in common. "The Holocaust had the effect of dispersing people all over the globe, far away from their familial and social ties, as did the British Empire. The difference is that the architects of the one intended to create the maximum degree of suffering to their victims – victimization was a conscious policy of the Nazi state – while those who created the empire saw themselves as doing the right thing by the unwilling recipients of their largesse" (*Vulpeslibris*).

The Caros, who were Jewish, thought themselves as German patriots. Many of their Christian friends were forced for migration. There is unusual pattern of emigration (India-Germany-Britain, Third Reich Germany-Britain) and powerful bonds between human beings across races, generations, and religions – not least of which is Vikram Seth's own loving bond with Shanti and Henny. While writing this book, doing research about Jewish Berlin, the Nazi edicts visited on its Jewish residents, deportations, conditions and procedures in the Theresienstadt and Berkenau concentration camps. At one point the author visited Israel to give a talk and found himself spontaneously going to Yad Vashem, where he found entries for Gabriele and Lola Caro mother and sister of Henny in German documents. Reading the German, a language Seth loved that was part of his connection to his great aunt Henny, when she had tutored him, so sickened him that for a period he stopped reading German. The author is also troubled with the fact he was publishing letters that were not meant for the public eye, but decided that since Shanti uncle and aunt Henny are long gone, their lives are now part of history.

Vikram Seth portrays 1970s England when he went to study in Oxford in autumn 1971. He got in to read English but decided to change it to Philosophy, Politics and Economics. His studies continued. Despite the fact that he was reading Politics, he was not much interested at the time in contemporary

British Politics. "Events in India in the aftermath of the Bangladesh War, the division of Pakistan and re-election of Mrs. Gandhi interested me far more. In Britain this was the time of miners' strike, and aunt Henny's letter (written on 20<sup>th</sup> February, 1972) reflects the circumstances throughout the country" (*Two Lives*, 22). In her letter she mentioned about 'High Risk' and 'Medium Risk' days for the black out. Shanti uncle, who had voted Liberal in every election since the War began darkly contemplating the possibility of voting Conservative, so bothered was he by the strikes and by what he saw as growing laziness and lawlessness.

Vikram Seth depicts the 1970s Britain on one hand and post war Germany on the other hand. He honestly discussed the role of Germany and German speaking people in the twentieth century while placing the story of Shanti and Henny in a historical context a country which was so central to both lives. Germany is a merely medium sized nation, less than two percent of the earth's population. Yet events and currents in Germany, scientific and political theories developed by Germans, and the direct and indirect effect of German arms have been instrumental in moulding event not only in Europe but far beyond. Berlin shaped the first half of the twentieth century and epitomised the second. The imperial and National Socialistic governments whose capital it was were the prime generators of the two world wars that marked the years till the end of the 1940s; and its own division from then till the end of the 1980s reflected the conflict between the communist and capitalist systems that played itself out across the world. Marx and Engels were both Germans and one of the major causes of the Russian Revolution was the war with Germany. Had there been no Russian Revolution, it is very doubtful, to continue the counterfactual chain, that there would have been a Chinese Revolution (*Two Lives*, 340-341).

As for India and the other colonised countries; their fate was greatly influenced by the two world wars initiated, at least in Europe, largely by Germany. Subject countries that provided soldiers, resources and funds for European – generated wars, ostensibly fought in the name of freedom, more vigorously sought their own. After the Second World War, the main victorious colonial powers, England and France, were financially and physically weakened and increasingly unenthusiastic about sacrificing their citizens' lives in order to oppress unwillingly and increasingly militant subject peoples. India became independent almost immediately, and within twenty years, almost the entire apparatus of overt colonialism had gone.

In art, music, literature, drama, architecture and scholarship in the humanities great contributions were made by Germany and the German-speaking world in the last century. They made singular contributions in the fields of science, quasi-science and pseudo-science, all of which, perhaps surprisingly, often coexist in the same country.

Seth writes "In this present century, of which a mere quinquennium has gone by, there are a number of areas – and four in particular – in which I think the effect of German history may be played out in a significant way. One of the greatest threats likely to be faced in this century is that of terrorism; improvements in technology combined with the willingness of people to die in order to inflict damage on their enemies will increase destructive force. The second area is Europe itself. Germany's crucial role, together with that of France, in the formation of the European Community and its precursors went back, not only to the ideas of Pan-European visionaries but also, it is sometimes claimed, to the practical experience of cooperation and collaboration between German and French bureaucrats during Second World War.

The third area where Germany has made and will probably continue to make a considerable contribution is in the area of ecological politics .... Finally, it may be the case that the terrible tragedies both caused by and inflicted on Germany in the previous century may help us to avoid them in the present one ...." (*Two Lives*, 345-347).

The tale which, Vikram Seth narrates could be considered 'typically Indian' or 'representatively Asian' with his obvious attachment to kinship structures. His parents were always "happy to see" him (*Two Lives*, 23). He says in an interview "My family has been the biggest thing in my life" (Observer). Certain Indian values remain crucial for Seth who has been an expatriate for a long time. "He has proved, if proofs were needed, after his Chinese Odysseys in print and *An Equal Music* that he is possibly the most international, of India's literary success stories. Seth ... just happens to be Indian by birth and

breeding; his literary sensibilities are European (*Times of India*). Contrary to this Seth was asked in an interview by Mini Kapoor calling *Two Lives* a typically diasporic book: “[A Suitable Boy] engaged with independent India’s early years. Now, you move to diaspora and your characters connect with major events of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, World War II and the Holocaust” (*Indian Express*). The two Seths (Shanti Behari & Vikram) belong to Indian culture by birth, to British culture for studies, earning and residence learning the language, and to German culture for studies and for family reasons and having learnt the language; Henny is German-Jewish by birth and native language, British by residence and adoptive language, and Indian linked by marriage to Shanti. They all are culturally diasporic and none belongs to anywhere in a definite sense. Sometimes, there is voluntary and sometimes, involuntary Diaspora. Vikram Seth expatriates voluntarily to study and returns voluntarily to India to write *A Suitable Boy*. With both Shanti and Henny, matters are not so simple. Shanti enters Germany voluntarily to study Dentistry which was cheaper in comparison to Britain but moves to England by force of events, by ruling out any return to India by choice. Henny’s migration to England, is, yet again, not by choice, but in later years both her non-return to Germany and refusal to India are self-chosen. Writes Rollason – “None of the three, has a single identifiable ‘home’: while Vikram Seth’s home is, if anywhere the global Anglophone literary market, Shanti and Henny – the one having lost an arm, the other having lost mother and sister – impressively build life and marriage in a country where neither is a native.” What Shanti and Henny made for themselves in England seems to be a model of multiculturalism. These two people who belonged to different backgrounds and different culture.

The book is not only splashed with multiculturalism but also multilingualism as well. Shanti and Henny’s common language of conversation is German and they speak English too, with fluency. Shanti being an Indian spoke Hindi fluently which makes him trilingual, although, “over the years (he) lost his ability to speak Hindi, the language in which he would have felt most at ease for the first two decades of his life” (*Two Lives*, 401). Vikram Seth is multilingual. He is able to speak four languages – Hindi, English, German and Chinese. He has been stressed upon speaking only in Hindi by his Amma who herself was bilingual. Vikram has to learn German in England for getting admission in Oxford. Shanti has a similar experience in Germany with Latin. Vikram’s reading capability of German actually made this book possible. Seth describes the requirement of migrants, to acquire certifiable linguistic skills in a variety of languages connected to the host countries’ cultural heritage.

*Two Lives* creates a new literary terrain where histories of resilient human relationships against the backdrop of migration and war re-inscribed in a hybrid genre, making it as a literature of global protagonism through ‘history writ large.’ *Two Lives* is not only history of individuals but also family, group, diasporic and local. The readers will read *Two Lives* with its ‘real’ history. “Shaken above the globe, we live out our fractured lives. Enticed or fleeing, we re-form ourselves, taking on partially the coloration of our new backgrounds. Even our tongues are alienated and rejoined – a multiplicity that creates richness and confusion” (*Two Lives*, 403). Seth has performed the documenting act of his relatives’ lives. Searching, interviewing his uncle managing information in their ‘history writ little’ – selecting adapting, translating and interpreting evidence, an act of situating himself and them in the world according to certain ethical parameters remaining true to the spirit of family memory.

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LBP PUBLICATION