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Interethnic theme in Vikram Seth's "Two lives"

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Abstract

Vikram Seth is one of the best-known Indian poets and novelist. He was born on 20th of June, 1952 at Kolkata, West Bengal. In this magnificent, tender story, Vikram Seth offers both a history of a violent century during WW II, as well as

an intimate portrait of an unlikely friendship, marriage, and abiding yet complex love of interethnic marriage.

The love being bloomed against the cultural divide and civil war is the whole new time in the book of "Two Lives".

Keywords: Interethnic Marriage, Intimate, Violent Century, Friendship

Introduction

Vikram Seth has published eight books in poetry and three of novels. He was given with several awards such as Padma Shri, Sahitya Academy Award, Pravasi Bharatiya Samman, WH Smith Literary Award and Crossword Book Award. Seth's genre of writing are novels, poetry, libretto, travel writing, children's literature, biography/memoir. Few of his notable works include; A Suitable boy, The Golden Gate and The Equal music.

Along with his first novel 'The Golden Gate', Seth's contribution of other works in poetry which include Mappings (1980), The Humble Administrator's Garden (1985), All You Who Sleep Tonight (1990) and Three Chinese Poets (1992).

His children's literary works, Beastly Tales from Here And There (1992) constitutes of ten different stories about animals. Seth has also written a travel book, From the Heaven Lake, Travels Through Sinkiang and Tibet (1983), which was an account of journey through Tibet, China and Nepal.

He wrote a wide range of genres, as in poetry, fiction, autobiography, travelogue, and song lyrics. Welsh, German, French, Mandarin, English, Urdu, Hindi and Devanagari were among the dialects he could converse in. (B, n.d.)^[1]

The Travels and Travails of memory in Vikram Seth's "Two Lives".

His nonfictional work, "Two Lives" is a memoir of his beloved uncle, Shanti Behari Seth, who was an immigrant from India, and his aunt, Helga Gerda Caro, a German Jew who was forced to flee her homeland by the Nazis during the rise of Hitler's dictatorship. With Two Lives, Seth has written a truly heroic tale which demonstrates just how much can sometimes be achieved against monstrous odds.

The story is written in the form of a memoir wherein letter is found in a trunk full of cobwebs.

The books follow five different parts, each giving a unique idea about the different periods of the family history which also includes the personal anecdotes from the family interviews, letters, photographs etc. that gave a further better illustration of where the events happened.

Interethnic themes in Two Lives

Ethnicity refers to shared cultural characteristics such as language, ancestry, practices, and beliefs. Furthermore, the application of pragmatic interpretative strategies in the literary studies would also produce multi-level discussions and interpretations of literary texts which may help heighten literary appreciation. (Sing, 2021)^[3]

Vikram Seth's idea of love has always been undefined and new, sometimes the reality strikes hard in lives that we so stick to things or a person that has nothing to do with the crisis we face or laws that society bind us with, it's all good on the side of holding to that bondage and naming it under the wholesome idea of love.

Set mostly in Germany and England, Two Lives recounts individual histories-at first parallel, and separated, but later

intertwined-of Seth's great-uncle Shanti Seth and his German-Jewish wife Hennerle Caro. (Butt, 2019) [2].

The main protagonist of the story, Shanti, migrated away from India for a wider exposure in his career life and came to study medicine and dentistry in Europe, as insisted by his family he decides to settle in Germany by 1930s.

As he makes through one of the institutions in Berlin, he decides to rant around in search of lodgings for his stay. That is when Henny's mother offers him a place, although in the beginning, Henny wouldn't like this idea because Shanti wasn't a German but eventually, she is charmed by his warmth, kindness and his friendly humour.

The whole idea of love never strikes Henny at first until she happens to reach out to Shanti again during the crisis of rise in Hitler, during the World War II. Being helpless, Henny tries to get Shanti back, when he migrates UK during that time. This is when both find solace in each other creating deeper memories and strong friendship that runs deeper than love.

This plot is all about how things can all change and the relationship with a person can happen out of prediction. It is unexpected whom anyone would end up falling in love and share an intricate relationship with.

The plot of the story revolves around two people across the globe from completely different cultural backgrounds and different ethnicities. The fact that they can have humanity and love in common despite their diverse cultural backgrounds, is what makes the novel a good read.

Although, initially, Shanthi was too naïve to be accepted by Henny, over a period, Henny starts to develop a strong intricacy with Shanthi. This tells the reader that relationships can triumph adversely.

What matters is not the place they come from or their ethnic backgrounds, or their ancestral history, what matters is how strong a bond they form and how much effort they make to live or strive in the interethnic love or marriage process.

Societal norms can become very binding and totally antagonistic to the idea of inter ethnicity or may be inherently harder to get to the truth. The characters in the story strive hard to accomplish all that is required to keep a relationship strong despite all hardships and problems.

Endurance of love despite different cultural backgrounds

Shanti and Henny both endure many trials before they meet again. Shanti serves as a dental and medical surgeon in the British Army, and he loses an arm after an explosion. He doesn't realize how he can work again, but until he is motivated to keep going, he eventually learns how to perform dentistry with his one hand.

Seth, explains about the struggles each of them have gone through during the devastation of World War II. Seth describes how Henny's family is also killed by the Germans and how hard it was for them to reach back to their belongings. Seth also throws light on how poorly the Jews were treated under the Rise of Hitler's dictatorship.

Shanti recalls how much he loves Germany. However, he's prohibited from practicing or studying dentistry in the Third Reich and also about Henny losing her job during those times for the fear of association with Jews.

Prior to everything, Henny would've already been engaged to Hans but later she discovers that Hans pretended to be a diligent Nazi.

However later the couple tend to cross paths and help each other, and the story tells us all about it, the letters they shared during the courtship and the strong affair that has been sustained within.

Conclusion

The whole idea about the book "Two Lives", is how spontaneous life can be and the twists it can take on love and relationship. Ethnic awareness is proposed to be the foundation for ethnic identity that typically emerges in early adolescence. Ethnic awareness includes three distinct dimensions: sense of belonging, sense of community, and sense of place within the context of their ethnic group. (Sing, 2021) [3] All of us may come to that point of realization and feel happy about things that happened for good and this story solely teaches us that admiration, love and respect can sustain any changes than can occur or any other circumstances which can separate one from it. Recovering from every obstacle in the journey of life is the idea being stated in the book.

Seth talks about equality through inter racial equality and diversity in cultural perspectives among the population surviving today.

The story creates a whole different perspective on love and relationship which is truly important.

Seth's interview on this story keeps his Uncle Shanti being eighty-five-year-old getting the occupancy in his past idea of love with Seth's late aunt Henny.

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