

World of Nature, Man and Animals in Vikram Seth's Beastly Tales from Here and There

A. D. Sasikala

*M.A. M.phil., Assistant Professor of English, J. K. K. Nataraja College of Arts & Science,
Komarapalayam*

Abstract- Literature serves aesthetic and didactic purpose; the combination of which is the major factor determining the greatness of the particular genre, providing the reader with sense of pleasure and directing him to the path of humanistic values like kindness, pity, tolerance, generosity, forgiveness, selfishness etc., Transformation and refinement of life into meaningful one can be achieved only by practicing these humanistic values. He incorporates together the complementary segments of life as available in the modern world into a meaningful form

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Literature serves aesthetic and didactic purpose; the combination of which is the major factor determining the greatness of the particular genre, providing the reader with sense of pleasure and directing him to the path of humanistic values like kindness, pity, tolerance, generosity, forgiveness, selfishness etc., Transformation and refinement of life into meaningful one can be achieved only by practicing these humanistic values. As a poet, Seth adds very interesting qualities to the body of Indian English poetry which has traditionally dealt with rather serious and ponderous themes. He has been called a neo-formalist and has been hailed as the writer of polished poetry. Seth in his poetry and fiction puts continuous emphasis on love and relationship and explores their many dimensions in a shifting, changing and corroding background. At the same time he incorporates together the complementary segments of life as available in the modern world into a meaningful form.

The beasts in *Beastly Tales from Here And There* are not humanized, they become by themselves, human beings, with all their involvements in the daily

process of living. The first tale "The Crocodile and the Monkey" is the well known story of the crocodile and the monkey, their initial friendship, and subsequent estrangement because of the crocodile's betrayal and bad motive. It is the opening story of the set of the 'Beastly Tales' that has taken its course from Ganga's green isle to the modern mainstream and has ever been successful to amuse the listeners. The poet aptly describes the huge reptile/amphibian as 'stubby legs' and 'scaly skins'. A sly, keen hunter, who'd lunge at his prey with, agreed to match his hunting skills, was a dedicated husband. His prime pleasure was to watch his wife relish the carcass that he so humbly lay at her feet. His friend, the monkey, was as generous in his love for the crocodile and his wife.

One day, after gorging on mangoes, she comes up with a strange desire. As an anniversary treat, she wanted something sweeter than those mangoes, something different from those dolphins, turtles, fish, mangoes that were brought to her by her doting husband. /I must eat that monkey's heart. (3)

Scalykins was caught in a sense of divided loyalty. The monkey was his friend and was generous to him. Mrs. Crocodile knows that there shouldn't be any problem in making him a prey. This attitude is prevalent in the human world too. The noble traits of friendship and trust and generosity are twisted and turned- they are used against its owner for their own selfish burning motives of greed and lust.

This is how Mrs. Crocodile has slyly managed the situation to her needs and Mr. Crocodile - a loyal husband would be only too eager to sacrifice his sense of loyalty towards his generous friend. Here they were, the monkey and the crocodile, together, near the tree that showered on them the nectar of life! And crocodile persuades him to be his guest- as a

special request from his wife. /Let us show our gratitude; // Share our friendship and our food. (4)

Delighted by such warmth, the monkey accepts the invitation and half-way in the journey to death. He reveals the motive of his charming hostess whose eyes were the gate to Heaven. Such a delightful use of irony is implemented here by Seth that effortlessly draws a smile from the reader. Kuroop then dangles a choice before the monkey- the mode of death:

To drown in the Ganga or to be
Gutted by my wife and me"?

He will let him choose the end! (5)

No less, the monkey, in an attempt to please the 'noble lady', with great presence of mind and cleverness, would go back to the tree and collect his precious belongings like heart, liver, halfbrain, a fingernail, cufflinks, chutney and spare tail.

Seth's wit and sense of fun is aptly illustrated in his description of the contents that the monkey claims to treasure in the hollow of the tree. The foolish crocodile hastens him to the bank (with tears of thankfulness), over-anxious to please his wife and let go of the sumptuous meal promised to his wife. The monkey laughs at his foolishness and squishy, rotten and dead mangoes thrown down upon the reptilian head mark the end of the story. Ample use of witticism, humour, irony- Seth is adept at creating an atmosphere that is definitely funny and hilarious. An age old tale is rejuvenated by the author's operative skills.

What is new about "The Hare and the Tortoise" is Seth's attempt to modernize the story and place it in the context of the twentieth century, this is a realistic depiction of the modern times. Seth emerges as a critic of the society run amuck by folly, frivolousness and empty- handedness. It is a society marked by shallow attitudes - gossip and rif-raff and scandal. The tortoise is a rational, level-headed and practical creature as against the frivolous hare. He is sure that he'd defeat the hare-brained hare' who was rash and young with a mindless tongue because he believes in 'slow but steady.' Before the race, the tortoise when ready, the hare, flighty and vain, was still:

pouting out her scarlet lips,
sweetly wiggling head and hips
making wolves feel weak inside. (38)

Though the tortoise won the race, all the adulation was lapped up by the hare. She was not going to be

shell-shocked, instead she grabbed all that was due to the tortoise. She was once again hailed and cheered.

Details of contemporary experience and speech which corresponds to these, find their place in the idiom and diction of the poet.

"The Frog and the Nightingale" opens with the egotistic frog who is so proud of his cacophonous voice that he prefers to sing all day, both to the disturbance and annoyance of all the beasts in the locality.

But one night, a nightingale enraptured the entire world by her melodies. A discerning reader may find in this nightingale a successor of Oscar Wilde's Nightingale in the celebrated fairy tale "The Nightingale and the Rose".

The literary echo of this fairy can be heard in this beastly tale. The frog, vexed and jealous at the arrival of nightingale. His enemy determines to make use of his intellect to get rid of the enemy once and for all. The frog feigns to be an unrivalled singer with a baritone and a seasoned music composer and critic to create an awe in the mind of the unsuspecting.

The frog tells the nightingale that without proper training given by a vocal specialist like him, the nightingale would soon fade into oblivion: /You'll remain a mere beginner //But with me you'll be a winner. (64)

From then on, the nightingale starts regarding the frog as her guardian angel and at his instruction practices day and night, in sun and shower till he dies out of exhaustion. The poet succeeds in bringing out the pathos and gnawing pain which the nightingale underwent at the verge of her death:

Day by day the nightingale
Grew more sorrowful and pale
Night on night her tired song
Zipped and trilled and bounced along... (69)

This, once again, is reminiscent of Oscar Wilde's Nightingale who similarly is about to die out of exhaustion:

But the Nightingale's voice
grew fainter, and her little
wings began to beat, and
a film came over her eyes.(69)

Vikram Seth enables his readers to lament the untimely pathetic death of a genius, doomed to destruction at the instigation of a jealous rival in the guise of a friend.

We find the emergence of a nature conscious poet in Seth's "The Elephant and the Tragopan", who can well pronounce like the romantic poet Cowper that God has made the country and man has made the town.

The peaceful lives of the beasts in Bingle Valley are threatened by a project taken up by The Great Big shot Number One Shri Padma Bhushan Gobardhan to construct a dam on the stream and supply water to the town. The project is taken up with a view to wooing the voters and extracting money from the contractors which is more important in the business of politics rather than the safety and security of a handful of beasts.

The tragopan 's impassioned plea to all the beasts touches them instantly and also makes his sloppy, slow and lethargic friend- the elephant a rebellious zealous one' The heated debate of the beasts mirror back to men their own natures-

He is a creature mild and vicious,
Practical-minded and capricious,
And if he hungers, we must die. (73)

Seth shows man as an animal capable of reason. An oblique comparison between the beasts and man shows how vain, brutal, vicious and greedy human beings really are. When the beasts march in unison to the 'Great Big Shot', he is at first reluctant to meet them without an 'appointment.' Estimating that the scale is heavier on the other side, the big shot tries to win over the spokesmen of the beasts- the elephant and the tragopan, first through deceit and tactfulness, then through allurements. He takes his time, alerts the police by concealed push button, now leaves aside, all his smoothness. The Big shot's good natured son's rebellion and his ominous prophecies make him all the more severe. When the guards appear, he succeeds in subjugating the rebellion through sheer muscle power but not before he had "wrung the little neck" of the tragopan with his own hand. The Big shot cunningly arranges a festive funeral for 'the martyr's self-less sacrifice,' evading thereby the public censure and indirectly securing his chair for the fourth coming election. Seth prefers to give his poem an open ending. The readers realize for the first time that while moving along with these beasts, observing them and listening to their words, they have come to like the beastly world. He comes to realize the tragic dichotomy between his sup-posed goodness and actual behaviour like Gulliver and

Mowgli. The poet doubts whether the fates will smile or frown, and Bingle vale will survive or drown. The simplicity and ease with which Seth draws also on Kipling in coming to such pleasurable and authentic communication is not unrelated to the pressure of contemporary Indian experience upon him even in writing a fable of this kind. It depends on us, the heirs of the postwar 'Green- Revolution' to decide the fate of the beasts and the associated fate of men in the twentieth century. All we can do is to prepare for that 'golden future' along with the major work of Orwell's Animal Farm. *Beastly Tales From Here And There* makes us realize the fact that human beings with all our capacity for love, goodness are so often mechanized and twisted either through society, politics or through a thousand different ways to inflict pain and sufferings on others.

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