

Review

Can Henny Speak? The inadequacy of epistolary narrative in Vikram Seth's *Two Lives*

Shweta Saxena

Amity Institute of English Studies and Research, Amity University, Noida, India.

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The dialectic of 'self' and 'other' contains within it the rhetoric of expression. 'Self' is given ascendancy over the 'other' because 'self' is able to speak while the 'other' is either considered unfit for speaking or forcefully muted or silenced. In the attempt to reclaim these lost voices of the 'other', a handful of intelligentsia 'represents' them before the world. But is it the true 'representation' of the lost voice or merely an artificial 're-presentation'? The discourse upon the 'representation' of unrecorded voices can be taken outside the realm of postcolonial critique and applied to the cosmopolitan narrative of Vikram Seth's *Two Lives*, a biography on the life of his great uncle Shanti Behari Seth and his German wife Henny. For a spirited reader the interest of the book lies not only in the awe-inspiring tale of cross-cultural relationship of Shanti and Henny, but also in the epistolary narrative technique conscientiously chosen by the writer. Vikram Seth, as the self-reflexive narrator of the story, explains the gestation of the book in the summers of 1994, when Aunt Henny was already dead and Shanti Uncle was a frail old man of eighty five. In the course of writing his book Seth interviewed Shanti many times to capture his side of story, but for recording Henny's voice there was no other way except her secret correspondence found by chance in a 'cob-web covered trunk' kept hidden at the attic of her room. Henny's letters, thus, form the basis of her side of story in *Two Lives*. But then, can these letters truly represent her actual persona? Are they worthy enough of being explored for the purposes of biography? Is it ethical to make personal letters of a private person publicly visible in the form of a biography? And lastly, but most importantly, can Henny really speak through them?

Key words: Vikram Seth, two lives, representation, epistolary narrative.

INTRODUCTION

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak writes in her seminal essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" that it is very difficult to capture the real voices of the subaltern, since the representation (as in art and philosophy) of their voices by the learned few is in fact not the representation ('speaking for' as in politics) of their actual voice. Spivak's thoughtful classification of 're-presentation' and 'representation' on the basis of the leftist discourse of

Deleuze, Foucault and Marx, foregrounds the limitation of second hand recording of an unrecorded narrative (Spivak, 2013). The life of Henny Seth as 're-presented' or rather re-constructed by Vikram Seth in *Two Lives* on the basis of her letters only gives a one-dimensional picture of her personality, hence not holistically 'represented,' a fact Seth (2008) himself was aware of while writing *Two Lives*: "About Aunt Henny my information

would be second hand. I could not interview her.”

ANALYSIS

Vikram Seth was motivated by his mother to write a book on the life of her uncle Shanti Behari Seth, an Indian expatriate settled in London and his German wife Henny Caro. The process of writing *Two Lives* essentially, like any other biography, followed the ritual of interviewing Shanti Behari Seth. But the sad part of it was that the other person in the story, Henny Seth, was dead by that time hence her side of story was almost extinguished. Seth (2008) expresses his remorse at this handicap, “I could not justly have called it *Two Lives* unless her voice played a role as strong as Uncle’s.” But then to his greatest relief one day after Henny’s death, while clearing out the attic of her room Vikram Seth’s father found “a small cobweb-covered tan-coloured cabin trunk” that had belonged to Aunt Henny (Seth, 2008). Inside the trunk Seth found the answer to all his questions: “Most important of all, there was a file of letters sent to her – and even the occasional carbon copy of a letter sent by her – covering almost exactly the decade of the forties (Seth, 2008).” Going through those letters Seth (2008) realized that,

. . . how rich the material was, so rich in fact that it provided me with an image of Aunt 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 of 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.

Seth’s exhilarated outburst at the discovery of Henny’s letters and his absolute faith in their veracity is clear from the above statement. Seth seems to be echoing Stanley’s (2004) view expressed in her advocacy of epistolary form: “. . . letters give to the emergent ‘voice’ of the letter writer, their characteristic turns of phrase and concerns, their rhetorical style in relation to different correspondents, and how all these things develop and change over time.” It, however, initiates a discourse upon the adequacy of epistolary narrative for the purposes of writing biography. There is no doubt that epistolary narratives were quite common in eighteenth century fictions, the most remarkable being Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela* (1740) and *Clarissa* (1748). The other notable epistolary fictions are Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774), Frances Brooke’s *The History of Emily Montague* (1769) and Henry Fielding’s parody *Shamela* (1741). According to

Encyclopaedia Britannica the reason for its wide popularity was that,

. . . it presents an intimate view of the character’s thoughts and feelings without interference from the author and that it conveys the shape of events to come with dramatic immediacy. Also, the presentation of events from several points of view lends the story dimension and verisimilitude.

Letters have special significance in the writing of biographies in the recent times where “letters have been used mainly as a resource and treated as referential of a person’s life and its historical and relational context, with the focus on content and its recording of factual information (Stanley, 2004).” Though epistolary form of narrative has its own advantages, it cannot blind one to its limitations that primarily lie in its confessional tone. It is highly improbable that the writer of the letters would confess their innermost secrets to the recipient in an unabashed manner. And even if they choose to do so, it is very likely that the epistolary form would fail them. The limits of epistolary narrative employed in the eighteenth century fiction are explained by Spacks (1987) in a poignant manner:

Eighteenth-century Epistolary Novels by women often assert the impossibility of saying what one means – or feels. “I am provoked at this natural incapacity of conveying my sentiments to you; words are but a cloak, or rather a clog, to our ideas,” one fictional letter writer complains. . . . Writers faced with the task of narrating intense experience often tell us their stories can’t be told (2013)

Further, the veneer of transparency worn by the re-presenter (writer of the epistolary novel) of the letters cannot obliterate the fact that the readers are getting a highly processed (thrice removed from reality) version of the events reported in the letter, for writer is constructing, as Bernard Duyfhuizen (1985) puts it, “a double narrative: a narrative of the events and a narrative of the letters that precipitate or report the events.” As such Henny’s letters can also be seen as having double narrative: one of the events that she reported to her friends and relatives or they to her, and the other of the letters through which the events are reported. Indeed, it is quite probable that the events and facts reported in the letters were toned down in accordance to the temperament and demeanour of the sender or receiver. The most noticeable example is the letter written to Henny by Uncle Siegfried on 20th Oct 1945 in which he communicates the news of her mother’s death in the concentration camp at Theresienstadt. Uncle Siegfried sensed the disturbed mental state of Henny for not being able to help her mother and sister who were

struck in Germany to bear the brunt of Holocaust. He, therefore, reported a made up version of the actual event regarding Henny's mother's last days in the camp hospital:

. . . Your mother died in a hospital that was excellently run and was situated in the middle of a park, so that even in her last days she was able to sit in the garden. She did not suffer any want; at the time, the standard of care was still basically satisfactory (Seth, 2008).

Nevertheless, Seth (2008) himself admits that "the facts of the concentration camp of Theresienstadt were very different . . . from the picture" Uncle Siegfried paints here. In order to capture the truth of Ella Caro's (Henny's mother) death at the camp, Seth refers to Zdenek Lederer's book *Ghetto Theresienstadt* that "describes the structures, conditions and history of the camp with a calmness and analytical distance remarkable in one who was confined there for several years (Seth, 2008)." The camps were, in fact, in a very deplorable state. They maintained a low level of hygiene and prisoners were mostly under-fed and malnourished. On the basis of his reading of Lederer's book, Seth (2008) re-constructs Ella Caro's last days in the hospital:

By the time Ella got to the hospital in Theresienstadt, she would have been sick and malnourished and prone to any kind of infection. Conditions there were not like those described in the Pawels' letter to Henny. Medical equipment and supplies were completely inadequate.

There are many other instances in the novel of mincing the words in the letters to suit the temperament of the recipient. Moreover, the interpretation of Henny's letters and their emplotment in the form of a coherent narrative is solely dependent on Vikram Seth's sagacity, who himself experiences many difficulties in understanding Henny's perspective on many occasions. Throughout the novel Vikram Seth struggles to comprehend the relationship between Henny and Hans, a relationship that could not bear the heat of communal hatred generated during the Third Reich. Seth did not get much information regarding this from Shanti, since Henny hardly revealed her actual feelings for Hans to anyone. Seth did get some idea about it through the letters exchanged between Henny and her friend Ilse. But he could not judge whether Henny really loved Hans passionately or that "it could be that deep-seated and intense love was not in her nature" (Seth, 2008). When Ilse informs Henny in one of her letter that Hans is not happy in his marriage with Wanda (a Christian woman whom Hans married at the behest of his father overriding his feelings for Henny), Henny's response seems to be cold and unimpassioned:

"Although he has, as you can well understand,

disappointed me a little, I feel a bit sorry for him because he is a good fellow, though very weak in character. Despite everything, I would have wished to hear that he was happy (Seth, 2008)."

Seth, however, could not reach to a satisfactory conclusion regarding Henny's love for Hans. The very fact of her passionless relationship with Hans was contradicted by "the mute evidence of the crumpled and possibly tear-stained poem to her from Hans, so carefully smoothed out again and replaced with its fellows" (Seth, 2008). In the poem Hans avouches to Henny rather assertively that "You will I love, just you alone/You should be the quiet happiness of my love!" (Seth, 2008). It is very much possible that Henny loved Hans deeply and was quite heart-broken at his betrayal but then "considering the private person she was" she would not have liked to express it to anyone even to her closest friend, Ilse (Seth, 2008). Even in her relationship with Shanti, she is never very explicit or expressive. It is very much clear from Shanti's letters written to her from the war front during Second World War that he always loved her with all the passionate intensity of his heart, but Henny could not reciprocate his feelings though she also valued him highly as a friend. Shanti and Henny were looked upon as a couple by their common friends even before they officially got engaged. It took them seven years to finally reach to the decision of marriage and Seth speculates that probably the cause of delay rested in the uncertainty of Henny regarding Shanti, which is evident in her letter written to her friend A G Belvin on 31st Dec, 1946, long before her engagement in 1949:

"Regarding Shanti, you are right, I am in a dilemma and don't know what I should do. I like Shanti, I value him, and he is particularly close to me because he is the only one here who knew my loved ones, and I could say, also loved them (Seth, 2008)."

However, the uncertainty in Henny's mind cannot be the reason for delaying their marriage, since Henny probably made up her mind about marrying Shanti by the end of 1946. The above quoted letter also serves as a testimony to the fact. Whatever reservations Henny had regarding her relationship with Shanti, she was fully convinced that she would not find a better person than Shanti, who would not only love but also understand her fully: "Shanti has a good and upright character, and I believe I may say that I also mean something to him. I want to make him happy - he deserves it - even at the risk that I am not 100% happy (Seth, 2008)." The cause of delay, then, necessarily was not Henny's "uncertainty" alone, but possibly Shanti's fear of being refused. He believed that "Henny had no heart: perhaps not 'no heart' as such, but no passionate romantic inclinations - or at least no romantic inclinations for him" (Seth, 2008). Shanti

eventually proposed to Henny only at the intervention of Henry and Mum (Henry's mother), for Shanti knew that "Mum would not have advised him to do so unless she had learned from Henny that she would accept" (Seth, 2008).

The picture of Henny's persona that Seth draws on the basis of her letter does not seem convincing enough on many other occasions. At places, it seems that Seth is reading too much within the lines and against the grain, so much so that he is colouring it with his own sensibilities. His understanding of Henny's relationship with Eva as 'passionate' and 'physical' seems to be preposterous. From the letters exchanged between Henny and Eva, it is very much evident that they were quite close to each other probably because of their common tragic past: ". . . the most passionate letters of all come from Henny's friend Eva Cohn . . . an Austrian refugee who had also lost her family to the Nazis (Seth, 2008)." But then on the basis of these letters it cannot be presumed that their relationship was anything more than the usual relationship between two friends. Eva's letters were originally written in German and the English transcription presented in the book is facilitated by Seth himself. There are many words and phrases in Eva's letters to Henny that Seth (2008) italicizes and explains in parenthesis. But then this highly self-reflexive manner of presenting these letters foregrounds the constructedness and subjectivity on Seth's part in interpreting them to the readers in sync with his own sensibility. Seth (2008) endeavours to explain the intimacy of Henny and Eva by relating it to a random conversation between himself and Shanti on one occasion regarding "relationships between those of the same sex". According to Seth, Shanti Uncle's attitude to such relationships was "tinged with facile prejudice; his remarks were sometimes quite unpleasant". But Seth (2008) very enthusiastically records that Aunt Henny was rather considerate towards such relationships:

. . . in the course of one conversation at teatime, while Shanti Uncle was holding forth on the subject, Aunt Henny quietly interrupted and said that there had been a girl in her office who had had a crush on her and had written her letters and poems. She had added that one had to understand these matters and these feelings.

Henny's acknowledgement and understanding of the "relationships between those of the same sex" does not essentially mean that she was herself having such relationship with Eva. And it is equally incongruous to believe that her relationship with Eva could have led to her delaying her marriage with Shanti, as speculated by Seth (2008). The letters of Henny and Eva rather establish their relationship as that of two sisters (Seth, 2008).

Such instances of limited or wrong interpretations of

letters while forming a view about a particular person are very likely to be found in an epistolary narrative. Another problem that this form contains is that it gives a dubious picture of subjectivity of the letter writer. Cook (1996) explains this lacuna in the following words:

The letter narrative is formally and thematically concerned with competing definitions of subjectivity: it puts into play the tension between the private individual, identified with a specifically gendered, classed body that necessarily commits it to specific forms of self interest, and the public person, divested of self-interest, discursively constituted and functionally disembodied.

It is, in fact, very difficult to judge a person through their letters. The private individual would hardly like to give vent to their feelings, whereas the public person would always give out the generalised views concerned with entire humanity at large. The exploration of letters for the purpose of procuring facts for a biography presents this incongruous amalgamation of private and public in a more perplexed form. Henny's letters to her friends and relatives or theirs to her were not meant for public viewing. But then, Vikram Seth had to take recourse to Henny's letters to give his book a truly two-dimensional form in the circumstance where there was no other way to relate Henny's side of story. Seth (2008) justifies his stance of mining Henny's private letters for his book by asserting that:

Every even-handed biography of a completed life has to deal with private matters and to present its subject as fully as possible, even if the subject, when alive, might have preferred to keep these matters obscured – or at least not open to the world. It is to help bring Henny to life that I am flouting what I feel would have been her wishes.

CONCLUSION

Though Seth's intention of bringing Henny to life is sacrosanct in every sense, his act of peeping through the private life of a reserved person like Henny and making it available for public display borders on the verge of voyeurism. In thirty-eight years of their marriage, Shanti never came to know about the contents of that trunk, which clearly suggests that Henny never wanted anyone to see them. It contained an extremely private aspect of her personality which she did not want to share even with her husband, not to say with the public. The epistolary narrative employed in *Two Lives* thus problematises the dialectics of public and private. It is, indeed, debatable that Vikram Seth's endeavour of giving voice to Henny by

exploring her secret correspondence gives her power to speak or rather it wrests from her the fundamental right of keeping her private life concealed from the public view.

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