

8. *The Tale of Melon City*

(Vikram Seth)

ABOUT THE POET

Born in Calcutta in 1952 to Prem Nath, a Shoe Company Executive, and Laila Seth, a Judge, Vikram Seth is the oldest of three children in the Seth family.

A brilliant student right from his days in Doon School, Vikram passed his "O level" exams with distinction. Later he went on to study at Tonbridge School (Kent) and Oxford University in England and Stanford University in the USA. He studied philosophy, politics and economics. During his two year stay in China (1980-82), he studied poetry and languages at Nanjing University and found himself "more interested in poetry than economics".

He shot into international fame with his verse novel 'A Suitable Boy' (1993). Published in fourteen countries, A Suitable Boy sold over one million copies worldwide and earned him the title "A Tolstoy - On His First Try" (The Washington Post). His works include : Mappings (1980), From Heaven Lake (1983), The Golden Gate (1986), All You Who Sleep Tonight (1990), Beastly Tales from Here to There (1991), Three Chinese Poets (1992), A Suitable Boy (1993), Arion and the Dolphin (1994), An Equal Music (1999).

ABOUT THE POEM

"The Tale of Melon City" is a humorous poem about a just and peaceful but foolish King and his foolish subjects. Once the King ordered that an arch be constructed stretching right across the main thoroughfare. He planned to address his subjects from this arch from time to time to instruct them morally and intellectually.

So the arch was built, and when the King was riding down that thoroughfare, his crown was knocked off due to the low arch. The

King got annoyed and ordered that the chief builder should be hanged. The chief builder was summoned and preparations were made for his execution. But he blamed it on the workmen. The 'just and placid' king now ordered that all the workmen should be hanged. The harried workmen pleaded that it was not their fault as the bricks were made of wrong size.

The King next summoned the masons, who trembling with fear, put the blame on the architect. Now the King ordered the execution of the architect who reminded him that it was his Majesty himself who had made some changes in the plans. Thus, the blame for the knocking of the crown fell on him. As per the law, he was to be executed. The people demanded the case to be taken to its logical conclusion. This infuriated and confounded the King. He did not know what to do. In utter desperation he ordered that the wisest man in the city should be brought to give advice on this matter.

The wisest man, a man who could neither see nor walk, was brought to the Royal Court and he suggested that the arch was the real culprit since it had banged the royal crown off and therefore it should be hanged.

But then a Councillor intervened saying that it was a shameful theory to hang the arch that had touched the royal head. By now the people had got restless and the King, sensing that some trouble was brewing up, was scared out of his wits. He ordered that, any man who fitted the noose should be hanged. Unfortunately since the noose was high and fitted no one but the King, the poor King had to be hanged so that the townspeople be appeased.

The Ministers were satisfied that justice had at last, been done and set out to choose the next ruler. They declared that the next person to pass the city gate would choose the ruler. As fate would have it, an idiot happened to pass by the gate and when he was asked to decide about the King, he replied that it should be a melon. In fact it was his standard

response to all the questions he was asked because he liked melons. The conscientious ministers carried the Melon to the throne and crowned it the new King. Now if the people are asked why their monarch is a melon, their stock reply is that it's His Majesty's pleasure to be a melon and they have no complaints as long as they are allowed to live in peace with liberty. It is their policy of non-interference which lead to such a state of affairs.

THEME

In "The Tale of Melon City", Vikram Seth lampoons the idiosyncratic and idiotic governance that is thrust on people sometimes. The bureaucracy and the professionals keep passing the buck in the poem. No one is ready to own up their folly. Seth also satirizes the lackadaisical attitude of the common people in choosing their rulers although the kind of the ruler they have directly affects the quality of their lives. The poem shows that law is not only blind it can also spell disaster if it is thoughtlessly implemented.

GLOSSARY

- placid - mild
- proclaimed - announced officialy or publicly
- triumphally - victoriously
- edify - improve morally
- spectators - onlookers
- thoroughfare - public entrance or road
- frown - to be angry, to express displeasure
- gallows - structure for hanging criminals
- disgrace - shame
- halt - stop
- summon - to call
- quivering - trembling

- ordain - appoint
- amendments - changes
- counsel - advocate, advise
- quavering - trembling
- scaffold - platform for execution of criminals
- culprit - criminal
- mused - thought
- muttering - speaking slowly
- perceived - judged
- decree - order
- unruly - wild
- pondered - thought deeply
- dilemma - a difficult situation or problem
- heralds - messengers
- idiot - stupid person
- enforced - implemented
- reverently - respectfully
- liberty - freedom
- laissez faire - an economic doctrine advocating that commerce and trade should be permitted to operate free of controls of any kind. It was a popular view in the mid 19th century

SHORT ANSWER QUESTIONS

(to be answered in about 40 words each)

Q1. What proclamation did the King make?

The King proclaimed that an arch be built stretching right across the main thoroughfare. He wished to morally instruct his subjects from that arch.

- Q2. What bitter experience did the King had after the arch was constructed? How did he react? Or**

'This is a disgrace,' says the King. When does he say so and how is it a 'disgrace'?

One day when the arch was ready the King happened to ride down that thoroughfare and his crown was knocked off due to the low arch that had been constructed. He is beside himself with rage and terms the fall of his crown as a disgrace and orders the chief of builders to be executed.

- Q3. What was the reaction of the King when his crown was knocked off?**

The King was quite annoyed and ordered that the chief of builders should be hanged. So the chief builder was summoned to the King and preparations were made for his hanging.

- Q4. What explanation did the workmen give to the King?**

The workmen were shocked to know that the King had ordered their execution. They pleaded with the King that it was not their fault as the bricks were made of the wrong size.

- Q5. What was the reaction of the King when he heard the reason given by the architect?**

The architect tries to save his skin by saying that the low height of the arch was a result of the changes the King had got made subsequently. On hearing the architect's reply the King was enraged and he lost his balance of mind. He ordered that the wisest man in the city should be brought to give him advice on the issue.

- Q6. What was the advice of the wisest man to the King about the issue?**

The wisest man declared that the arch was the real culprit. He argued that the arch had banged the royal crown off and so it should be hanged.

Q7. What did the King do when he apprehended the mood of his people?

The King at once ordered that the guilt factor should be put aside and said that any man who fitted the noose should be hanged.

Q8. Whom did the noose ultimately fit?

Each man's neck was measured for the noose but none fitted it. It was so because the noose was very high. Eventually, the King's neck was found to perfectly fit the noose. Only he was tall enough to reach it. Thus, he was to be hanged.

Q9. What proclamation did the ministers make after the death of their King?

The Ministers at once made an announcement that the person who passed through the city gate next would choose the ruler of the state.

Q10. In the end who was put on the throne and why?

An idiot had happened to pass by the gate next. As per the announcement he was invited to decide who the next King would be. Foolish as he was he said that the next King should be a Melon. Infact it was his standard response to all the questions because he liked melons.

Q11. Why has the King been described as 'just and placid'?

The King has been described as just because he was fanatic about dispensing justice. He somehow wanted to decide the case of the arch by hanging any suitable person. He usually remained calm or placid, until something as serious as the fall of his crown took place. The description of the King as just and placid is rather ironical.

Q12. Explain : 'Long live the King! The King is dead'.

It is an age long tradition of Monarchy not to leave the throne of

the King vacant even in the event of his death. Thus, whenever a King died, a new King was ordained before the funeral of the dead King. The subjects in such a situation would say, "The (old) King is dead, Long live the (new) King."

Q13. Why have the King's men been described as practical men? What is ironical about this description?

The King's men were practical in the sense that they immediately got down to selecting a new King after the previous King was hanged by a royal decree. Unfortunately, they were not wise and farsighted enough to see their foolishness in hanging their own King for no fault of his.

Q14. How did the Ministers show reverence to a 'melon' after it had been declared the next King of the state?

After the idiot declared that the next King should be a melon, the King's men crowned the Melon as their next King and carried it in a royal procession to the throne and reverently placed it on the throne. The King Melon ruled the Kingdom for many years.

Q15. Why did the King want to postpone consideration of finer points like guilt?

The case of the arch was taking too long to be decided. Meanwhile the King's subjects grew restless and demanded justice. The King decided to postpone the finer points like who was really guilty in the arch case and ordered someone to be hanged to quell public outrage.

Q16. What does the author actually want to say in making an idiot choose a King?

By making an idiot choose the King, Vikram Seth only wishes to highlight how the thoughtless and foolish people go about choosing irresponsible governments and then adopt a lackadaisical attitude to the powers that be as long as they are allowed to live.

LONG ANSWER QUESTIONS

(to be answered in about 120 – 150 words each)

Q1. Narrate "The Tale of Melon City" in your own words. (Textual)

"The Tale of Melon City" is a humorous poem about a 'just' and 'placid' King. Once he got an arch constructed across the main thoroughfare. When he was riding down the thoroughfare his crown was knocked off due to the low height of the arch. The King was annoyed and he summoned the chief of builders who passed the blame on to the workmen. The workmen accused the masons, who in turn put the responsibility on the architect instead. The architect too saved his skin by giving an excuse. The King then asked for the advice of the wisest man who declared that the arch was the real culprit and therefore should be hanged. A Counsellor protested this saying that it was shameful. The crowd got restless and the King declared that any man who fitted the noose be hanged.

Ironically, only the King's neck fitted the noose and he was thus hanged. The council of ministers then declared that as per the law, the person who passed the city gate next would choose the ruler. An idiot happened to pass the gate at that time. So he was asked to name the next King. He suggested that a Melon should be the King. The Melon was carried to the throne. If the people are now asked why their monarch is a melon their reply is that, "It's His Majesty's pleasure to be a melon and they have no complaints as long as they are allowed to live in peace and liberty."

Q2. What impression do you form of the state where the King was 'just and placid'? Or (Textual)

What impression do you form of the state where the King nurtured the values of justice and placidity?

The destiny of a state is directly linked to the intelligence,

character and leadership of its King. Generally speaking a State is thought to be progressive and peaceful if its King or ruler is just and placid. The judicious nature of the King or ruler helps to build confidence in the common folk who can lead their lives without any fear or threat. It is the rule of the law that prevails and not the whims and fancies of a person. Even the members of the Royal Family are not outside the purview of law and are accountable for their actions. The people enjoy full liberty and have the freedom to express their opinion and raise their voice against the arbitrary decisions taken by the state from time to time. In this way every individual is equal before the law and his rights are safeguarded by the state.

- Q3. How according to you can peace and liberty be maintained in a state?** *(Textual)*

Peace and liberty are two very vital ingredients for an overall development of the state. A state will always remain bereft of peace if the aspirations of its people are not met. Therefore, it is the foremost duty of rulers to provide social, economic and political security to its people and as well as fulfil their basic necessities of food, clothing and shelter. In order to guarantee liberty the general public should be given the right to freedom of speech and expression. Their right to elect the government is the most important tool in their hands and this right should be protected by the State at every cost. Independent courts of law should be established to implement laws and safeguard the rights and equity of everyone to ensure peace, opportunity and prosperity to all.

- Q4. Cite a few instances in the poem which highlight humour and irony.** *(Textual)*

Humour is all pervasive in the poem "The Tale of Melon City". It

is in fact a very telling satire on the principle of 'laissez faire' and how it can be dangerous in the hands of nincompoops.

In the beginning the incident in which the King's crown falls because of low height of the arch is very humorous. Then the manner in which the accused people put the blame on others and go scot free sends us into peals of laughter. Even the decision of the wisest man, who could neither see nor walk, summoned by the king to hang the arch appears to be very ridiculous and funny. Another humorous thing is the way an idiot is asked to choose the king and his choice of a melon as the next King is ludicrous enough to make us laugh more. The ministers' act of coronation and the royal procession of the Melon King to the throne are quite interesting. No doubt the poem is humorous but there are some ironical situations in it, too.

The strange attitude of the King listening to and accepting everyone's excuses without using his own wisdom and sense of judgment and ordering an immediate hanging to take place only for the sake of pacifying his agitated subjects is very ironical. This act of his, however, results in his own hanging. More ironical is the fact that an idiot is invited to nominate the next King and he selects a melon as the King!

Q5. What is your opinion about the King's sense of justice?

The King has been described as 'just' and 'placid' but in fact he lacks both the qualities. He may appear to be just to his foolish and sycophantic courtiers and ministers but not to a man of rational thought.

In fact the King's idea of justice is quite ludicrous. It is not at all based on logic, reason and evidence. It is an outcome of his stupid and whimsical fancies. He cannot decide as to who is

responsible for the low height of the arch. When his subjects grow restless for justice, he finds a scapegoat to pacify the crowd. Hanging the 'culprit' he thinks would signal that justice has been duly done.

Then the way the 'suitable culprit' is searched for is most ridiculous. Poor King! Ironically, he pays a heavy price for being a nincompoop. He is hanged for a crime he never committed. What is funny is that he himself signs the royal decree of his execution! What can be more stupid and absurd than this?

Q6. What message does the poet wish to convey to his readers through the poem "The Tale of Melon City"?

There is no Vikram Seth poem without a moral lesson. "The Tale of Melon City" is no exception. In this poem the poet talks about the short-sightedness and foolishness of the governing class and the bureaucracy and the indifference that populace come to have to the kind of government and governance they have. He also seems to make fun of the way governments or rulers are chosen sometimes and the way justice is dispensed. Thus the point Vikram Seth wishes to bring home is that people need to be wise and careful in choosing their governments, which in turn should be responsible and transparent to the populace. As regards the bureaucrats, they will do well not to be sycophants but professionals whose competence should do the talking. Instead of passing the buck they should own responsibility and work like a team for the benefit of the common people instead of indulging in one-upmanship.

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