Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal
(ISSN: 2278-9529) Vol. 15, Issue-III, May 2026
https://www.galaxyimrj.com/

Beastly Times: Fabulation in Vikram Seth's *Beastly Tales from Here and There*

Dr. Divya Pradhan
Associate Professor,
Department of English,
Mata Sundri College for Women,
University of Delhi.
divyapradhan@ms.du.ac.in
https://orcid.org/0009-0004-0442-9450
https://doi.org/10.66376/galaxy.v15.n3.8

Abstract:

This paper employs a qualitative, interpretive method to analyse Vikram Seth's *Beastly Tales from Here and There.* A close reading of individual fables, situated within the broader context of earlier fables, will be used to understand the thematic and structural similarities and differences with their predecessors. The paper explores Seth's recensions through Walter Benjamin's theoretical concept of "Afterlife" (*Fortleben)*, showing how these fables renew and revitalise ancient tales by subverting their traditional moral certainties with ambiguity. Through detailed analysis of the fables, this paper demonstrates how Seth's fables give ancient tales an afterlife, offering a more sophisticated view of human nature. Seth's narrative technique is markedly different from that of the ancient fables. Seth uses incongruent elements of narration: open-ended plots with dark, gory actions narrated in tetrameter couplets that create a sense of levity; moral ambiguity in a cruel, heartless world populated by grey characters, accompanied by witty observations and black humour, contribute to the creation of layered postmodern fables. Thus, *Beastly Tales from Here and There* gives these ancient fables a delightful "Afterlife".

Keywords: Adaptation, Fables, Intertextuality, *Fortleben* (Afterlife).

Article History: Submitted-05/05/2026, Revised-14/05/2026, Accepted-16/05/2026, Published-31/05/2026.

Introduction

Vikram Seth's *Beastly Tales from Here and There* (1991), a collection of fables, is notable as one of the few such collections in the Indian Writings in English tradition. The near absence is surprising, given India's rich tradition of fable writing dating back to the Rig Veda. The fable's brevity, ethical imperative, and capacity to speak truth to power are effectively utilised in this retelling, enabling him to explore the complexities of the modern world. He adopts an innovative narrative approach that draws on classic conventions while inflecting them with a modern sensibility and stylistic innovations. The ten fables draw on Indian, Chinese, Greek, and Ukrainian roots, with two being his original compositions from "the Land of Gup". They are composed in rhyming verse, lending them a veneer of delightful levity. At the same time, the plots are primarily dark and gruesome. Vikram Seth's retellings of ancient fables revive and modernise an ancient narrative tradition that is especially relevant amid current political, social, and ecological uncertainties.

In the IWE tradition, Suniti Namjoshi and Ranjit Lal are notable fable writers. Suniti Namjoshi's works, including *The Blue Donkey Fables*, *The Mothers of Maya Diip*, *Feminist Fables*, *The Conversation of Cow*, and *Aditi and the One-Eyed Monkey,* critique prevalent racism, homophobia, and other prejudices in contemporary society. Ranjit Lal, a renowned ornithologist, has authored *The Crow Chronicles*, *The Life and Times of Altu Faltu*, and *Rumble in the Jungle*. Overall, the fable remains an important yet underutilised vehicle for social, political, and ethical reflection.

The paper addresses a significant research gap, as both the text *Beastly Tales from Here and There* and the modern fable genre have received limited scholarly attention within English Studies in India. Drawing on Walter Benjamin's concept of the "Afterlife", the paper explores how Seth revitalises the ancient tales. Benjamin's essay "The Task of the Translator" (1921) provides a suitable theoretical framework for this research. The essay serves as a preface to his

translation of Baudelaire's *Tableaux Parisiens*. Benjamin's complex theorisation views translation as an act of revealing "pure language". He proposes that a supra-historical kinship exists between languages, but each language is a fragment, and only a totality of languages would lead towards the "pure language" (Benjamin 257). This is central to his formulation of translation's centrality in literary transmission. Consequently, a focus on fidelity to the original, solely to transmit what it "communicates" into the target language, is unnecessary. A work of translation not only conveys the message of the original text but is a text in its own right. He views translation as an art form that passes a text from one language into another, thereby liberating it from an overly fixated focus on correctly "carrying across" literary meaning. Any such attempt is simply an inaccurate transmission of inessential content. He challenges the classical translation paradigm by arguing that a poem, image, or symphony is not created with the reader, viewer, or audience in mind (253-254). He opines that translation is a mode and an autonomous literary form that gives a text an Afterlife, *Fortleben*. He writes:

> For a translation comes later than the original, and since the important works of world literature never find their chosen translators at the time of their origin, their translation marks their stage of continued life. The idea of life and afterlife in works of art should be regarded with an entirely unmetaphorical objectivity.(Benjamin 254)

In *Three Chinese Poets,* Vikram Seth uses the metaphor of a trampoline to describe translational strategies he is keen to avoid (Seth xxxi). In *Beastly Tales from Here and There* (1991), the poet-translator has no qualms as he bounces into the creative stratosphere, mirroring the leaping, bouncing, and flying beastly protagonists and antagonists of his fables. The fables are examined by extending Benjamin's concept of the "afterlife" to show how Vikram Seth's transcreations serve as value-added performances that renew and reshape these fables while maintaining continuity with the ancient stories. The study also highlights Seth's narrative

technique and recensions as modes of subverting ancient morality and reflecting contemporary ethos.

A Brief History of Fables

Fable, as a mode of narration, is the most natural and encompassing of all genres, as it is rooted in our existence in nature. Throughout history, fable has been integral to the ethical, discursive, and aesthetic traditions of all civilisations, reflecting humanity's organic perspective on its place in the universe. Until the onset of modernity, the dichotomy between humans and nature was absent. As fables are conceptualised on the premise of the essential oneness of all non/beings, they also chronicle humanity's earliest attempt towards an all-embracing cosmopolitan vision, as opposed to a utilitarian view of nature as a resource. H. J. Blackman posits that "Species of animals and birds had recognisable identities and differences for which they had been given specific names," and that this provided a ready-made scheme for classifying human group identities and differences, which it was socially important to recognise and maintain (203). 'Fable', derived from the Latin *fabula*, means a story or a narrative. The word fabula is derived from the Latin *fari* (speak) and the Greek *phanai* (say/speak). H. J. Blackham defines a fable as a "metaphorical representation of truth" (Blackham xii).

The fable tradition in the West is traced back to Aesop, a hunchbacked enslaved man who lived in 6 BCE and provided a narrative prototype distinct from the Homeric myths and legends. India's rich tradition of fables dates back to the *Rig Veda,* which features one of the earliest fables in the Indian tradition, the "Frog Hymn". The *Jatakas*, *the Mahabharata*, *the Panchatantra,* and its later recensions, such as the *Hitopadesha* and the *Kathasaritsagar,* demonstrate the enduring popularity of this genre. The *Panchatantra* travelled the world, and *Kalilah wa Dimnah,* or Tales of Bipdai, is its most famous recension. Its significance is attested by its being the first text translated into English by Charles Wilkins and William Jones in 1787.

In the twentieth century, these tales were once again popularised through children's comics such as *Tinkle* and *Amar Chitra Katha*. The genre remains popular today, as evidenced by Hollywood blockbusters featuring stories with an underlying moral theme, such as Ice Age, Madagascar, and Zootopia.

The Teller of Beastly Tales

When P. Lal coined the term "Transcreation", he was not proposing a new translation method. The Indian literary tradition has a long history of adapting and reinterpreting existing texts. Transcreation is also not exclusive to India; many ancient civilisations with rich oral traditions modified texts over generations. This is especially true of myths and fables, which could be reshaped more freely than liturgical texts. Transcreative practices are vital to cultural exchange, which could otherwise be constrained by strict translation rules if translation were merely about "carrying over". Although translation has traditionally emphasised fidelity to the original, this perspective has shifted. Today, translations are valued as standalone texts. Seth's recensions illustrate transcreative methods, prioritising adaptation to reflect a modern ethos over fidelity to the original fables.

The title of the collection "Beastly" is fitting because Seth's recensions depart from the wholesome certainties of action and consequence and from the presence of divine justice that punishes wrongdoers, as found in ancient fables. The closed-ended plots of ancient fables and the unequivocal moral lessons they impart have been subverted. In their moral ambiguity, graphic violence, and unresolved endings, Seth's fables create a world that is genuinely beastly. Seth's ten fables are composed in tetrameter couplets, creating a fast-paced, bouncy narrative that aligns with the comic rather than a sombre moral tale. This levity also subverts the narrative technique of ancient fables, in which stories were woven around a strong moral core, a neatly plotted storyline, animal characters representing virtues or vices, and a strong authorial voice

that underlined the moral lesson, leaving little room for ambiguity. Unlike the ancient tales, Seth's stories do not offer insight or moral judgement on the characters' actions or their consequences. The tone, bordering on flippancy, the use of irony and satire, and the verses, composed in a metre and rhyme scheme better suited to light verse, narrate dark, beastly stories in a way that gives them a modern afterlife.

The first fable in the collection, "The Crocodile and the Monkey", is a recension of the *Sumsumara-Jataka* tale. The context is the Buddha narrating the story to Jetavana about Devadatta's repeated past attempts to murder him. The original fable recounts the time when King Brahmadatta ruled Benaras and a crocodile attempted to eat his friend, the monkey. The Buddha identifies himself with the monkey (a Bodhisatta) and Devadatta with the crocodile. The fable concludes with the following lines, "The monkey, having escaped, taunts the crocodile: 'Great is your body, verily, but how much smaller is your wit! / Now go your ways, Sir Crocodile, for I have had the best of it'" (Rouse 112).

Seth retains the core story of the clever monkey who outsmarts his unfaithful but foolish friend, the Crocodile. Set on Ganga's greenest isle, Kuroop the Crocodile (a wife-worshipper if ever there was one) spends his days hunting prey and paying homage to his wife by dragging carcasses for her to devour (Seth 279). When not paying obeisance to his wife, he spends time with his friend, the Monkey, who ensures that Kuroop and Mrs Crocodile partake of the choicest mangoes that would otherwise have remained out of reach for the denizens of the Ganga. The friendship is sustained by the Monkey's goodwill, since he has nothing to gain from the Crocodile except the pleasure of friendship. Crocodiles, however, prey on monkeys—a fact the Monkey has either forgotten or chosen to overlook for the sake of their relationship.

The plot is familiar, but Seth's delightful verse breathes new life into it. His fables explore the moral and ethical grey areas typical of modern, self-centred, utilitarian relationships. The Crocodile's infidelity shows when he offers little resistance to his wife's devious plan to eat

the Monkey. The Monkey accepts his friend's invitation. As they reach the middle of the river, the Crocodile reveals his bloody secret and presents the Monkey with a terrible choice: either be gutted by the Crocodile couple or drown (283).

The clever Monkey instructs the Crocodile to return to the tree's hollow, where he has kept his heart and sundry items (283-284). The Crocodile reveals the secret too soon, allowing the Monkey to save himself. The manipulator becomes the manipulated. The fable illustrates that, on the one hand, nothing can be gained by excessive greed and unfaithfulness; on the other hand, it extols intelligence. In the *Jatakas,* too, the Monkey's intelligence is foregrounded.

However, there is no overt moral condemnation of the Crocodile's behaviour, nor does the Monkey exact revenge; rotten mangoes are unlikely to harm a scaly Crocodile. In Seth's fable, justice feels uncertain. The tale ends with the Crocodile wearing a regretful smile, but its meaning is ambiguous, and there is no indication that Kuroop, the Crocodile, has learned a moral lesson. In the context of the Jataka tales, the fable holds religious significance and carries a sense of gravitas, but Seth's narrative technique subverts this, leaving the reader flummoxed about the author's intention. The reader is left pondering several unresolved questions. Is it the Crocodile's *dharma* to eat its natural prey, and the Monkey's *dharma* to outwit the Crocodile, its natural predator? Can friendship exist between natural enemies? Can one ever let one's guard down, even when two apparent enemies build camaraderie? The fable also explores realpolitik; while friendship may be possible and is worth pursuing, it is crucial to keep one's wits about one. The fable also touches on realpolitik; friendship is possible and should be pursued, but it is crucial to keep one's wits about.

The next fable is an adaptation of "The Bug and the Poor Flea" from the *Panchatantra*. Seth's fable "The Louse and the Mosquito" is almost an inversion of the first. While the Crocodile fails in his duty as a host, in this fable it is the guest who exploits the host's generosity. The fable is based on a well-known tale of a louse living in the King's bed for

generations, which “She and her enormous brood/Drank the King’s blood for their food” (Seth 286). One fateful day, a Mosquito arrives and pleads to stay the night, and the tender-hearted louse allows it on condition that he will not bite the King. The louse and her family are adept at sucking the King’s blood, while the Mosquito is unfamiliar with their technique. The Mosquito agrees, but at the sight of the plump King, quickly rescinds and dives in without heeding the louse’s cry. The King, who is still awake, cries out in pain, “I’ve been bitten! Search the bed! Find and strike the creature dead!” (289). Upon closer inspection, the louse and her family are found and exterminated, while the Mosquito escapes detection. The fable ends with the unrepentant Mosquito, mildly humming, flying off to find more prey, while the family of lice lies dead. Readers are left to wonder who among the King, the Louse, and the Mosquito deserves sympathy—kings, lice, and mosquitoes are all known parasites.

Seth’s adaptation raises several questions that remain unanswered. For instance, what parasites are tolerable? Can one be too hospitable and kind? Should we help others even if we know the potential dangers they might pose? The louse clan had remained undetected for generations because they had perfected the art of bloodsucking. We know that precipitancy and haste bring doom, but do we sympathise with anyone in particular—Creep the Louse, Sir Leap the Mosquito, or even the King? The unrepentant Mosquito offers a truthful depiction of human nature. One clear lesson the fable teaches us is that gullibility and naïveté are unhelpful and that the meek do not always inherit the earth.

“The Mouse and the Snake” is a brief, brutal tale of a mouse’s revenge against a snake that has devoured her friend. It is the shortest fable in the collection, and in its brevity it enacts the vengeance of the heroic, tiny mouse. The author notes that the version is based on a fable in which Mr Yang saw Mr Zhang, the poet, compose “The Faithful Mouse” to commemorate the mouse’s bravery (Seth, 202). In the story, two mice enter a granary where many mice had previously died. In their carelessness, they overlook the lurking snake, which quickly swallows

one of them. The surviving mouse seeks revenge and fights until the snake spits out the dead mouse and retreats. The moral of the story is that even the weakest may destroy the powerful through strategy and persistence. It emphasises the importance of strategy over raw physical strength and shows how vengeance can inspire a tiny mouse to defeat its natural predator, the venomous snake. However, the victorious mouse is left sobbing over her friend's corpse. Victory in battle does not bring joy, and a sense of futility pervades. The poet notes that being immortalised in verse is meaningless because the mouse will never read it, so the poem holds no value for the bereaved. The fable has topical resonance, as it reflects the struggles and protests of ordinary people against the powerful, which often bring no lasting comfort.

The second Chinese fable in this collection is the well-known tale of "The Rat and the Ox". It explains how the animals came to be associated with each year of the Chinese calendar (Comstock). In the original Chinese fable, a great race is organised, and the Cat and the Rat sit on the back of the thick-headed Ox, who is unaware of their presence. However, when they cross the river, the Rat jolts, sending the Cat flying off the Ox's back and into the river. The Ox continues to lumber ahead, and just as he approaches the finish line, the Rat jumps off him and wins the race. It is believed this is why rats are placed first in the zodiac; cats hate water and hunt rats.

The story begins when the Chinese zodiac veers off course, throwing everything topsy-turvy, so the order needs to be restored. China is infamous for its labyrinthine bureaucracy, cheekily embodied by a scholar-deity who crunches data for thirty-three years (Seth 294). After decades of bureaucratic red tape, the report (characteristically) offers improbable suggestions for assigning the twelve animals to guard the zodiac. The Gods initially balk, but when they hear that "It is an interim report", fear of further delay forces them to act immediately, as recommended. The implementation is chaotic because common sense is overlooked by bureaucracy. Nonetheless, after several adjustments, the problem is almost resolved until the

Rat throws a fit at being kept in second place, claiming that equality is denied and demanding to be placed first. The wily Rat appeals to public opinion, and the contest is scheduled. The sly Rat goes to the Ox at night and cries pitifully to gain sympathy. The unsuspecting Ox, feeling sorry for the Rat, agrees to let the Rat seek divine help to increase his size (298). The Rat goes to God, who doubles his size. On the appointed day, the crowd look at the Rat (now twice his usual size) and cry, "What a beast! how huge! how massive!" (298). This illustrates that public opinion cannot be trusted because it relies on impressions rather than objective truth. Seth's version is a modern-day fable about the perils of bureaucracy, the clamour for equality that may overlook the deserving, and the erratic nature of public opinion. Continuing with Seth's rather dismal view of human affairs, there is no victory in being too kind, especially towards enemies and competitors. Instead, guile is more potent than good, and the prize goes to the trickster, even when the Gods themselves are watching. For the Ox, God is as good as dead.

Fables have long been used to impart moral lessons, share worldly wisdom, and explain natural phenomena. "The Eagle and the Beetle", an ancient Greek fable, explains why Eagles do not lay eggs during the months when beetles fly (Aesop). This version of Aesop's fable is a rare tale in this collection, as it shows the good triumphing over evil. In the original story, a hare fleeing from an eagle finds refuge with a beetle. The beetle intercedes on the hare's behalf and cites Zeus's laws on hospitality. The arrogant Eagle disregards the puny beetle and kills the hare. The beetle then takes revenge by following the Eagle to its nest and rolling out its eggs. After several failed attempts to save her eggs, the Eagle pleads with Zeus to guard them. Zeus places her eggs on his lap, but the beetle throws a ball of dung at him. When Zeus stands to clean it, the eggs fall and break. The fable upholds the principle of hospitality and suggests that, irrespective of one's power, punishment will be duly meted out to those who disregard it. Seth's adaptation is notably darker and more violent, with vivid, gory imagery. In the final stanza, the poet subverts the simple morality tale and leaves the ending ambiguous, "They say

that eagles will not nest/ In months when beetles fly their best;/ But others not so superstitious/ Merely asserts that Fate's capricious/ And that the strong who crush the weak/ Maynot be shown the other cheek" (Seth 303). The two operative words here are "capricious" and "may", which leave us wondering whether justice, as illustrated in this fable, is consistently delivered.

The classic fable of "The Hare and the Tortoise" illustrates that "slow and steady wins the race". Seth's fable takes place in Runnyrhyme, where the hot-headed hare and the slow-and-steady tortoise live. The hare is a typical socialite, waking at noon and gossiping on the phone with the mouse, the mole and the empty-headed vole (304). The tortoise embodies his slow-and-steady reputation by counting his toes daily, not once but twice and thrice, tallying his savings in the bank, counting his three grandsons, and engaging in dry, practical matters.

One day, after the hare mocks him, he claims he will beat her in a race. Seth provides a delightful account in which the tortoise eventually wins, yet it is the hare, more fashionable than sporty, who is the true winner. She becomes wildly popular, sells film and book rights, and continues to spend her time gabbling and gossiping, while the tortoise is soon forgotten (311-312). Seth's version underscores the capricious nature of public opinion and social values, where beauty is valued over substance. Nevertheless, the poet does not condemn the hare's fecklessness; the tortoise also cuts an absurd figure with its dull, unimaginative lifestyle. Seth's adaptation subverts the Aesop fables' moral lesson that "slow and steady wins the race", rendering steadiness irrelevant in the modern world. It is a sharp critique of the contemporary ethos in which celebrity culture and glamour overshadow true merit, and spectacle is rewarded over substance. This is particularly true of films, social media influencers, TV anchors, and other public figures who earn disproportionately higher pay than professionals in essential services.

"Cat and the Cock" is based on a Ukrainian fable about a cat and a cock who live in harmony. While the cat goes out to forage, the cock tends the house. Despite repeated warnings

from the cat, the cock narrowly escapes the fox's attacks. He does not learn his lesson and is eventually captured by the fox. The cat uses guile and a fiddle to trap the fox's children, thus saving his friend. He then kills the foxes and makes beds from their fur. After the predator's death, the two friends spend the rest of their lives in peace and plenty ("The Cat, the Cock, and the Fox").

Seth's adaptation adds more humour through wordplay and versification, transforming the otherwise grim tale into a lively and amusing one. In this adaptation, the two musically inclined friends live in Feldermaus (German for flying mouse). The cat, like his Ukrainian ancestor, "would range and roam/Far away from hearth and home", receives a warning, "Cocko have a happy day./ But do not step out of doors/ Don't trust other carnivores./ Please avoid your usual scrapes. You've had many close escapes." (Seth 313-314). The foolish cock, who never seems to learn a lesson, falls into the fox's trap and is taken away to be slaughtered and eaten. At the fox's den, the mother leaves her children — Valentina, Velveeta, Veera, Violet, and Peter — with a warning not to step outside or talk to strangers. The musical cat, carrying a fiddle, outsmarts the foxes, traps them in a sack, and spares their lives only because of their pitiful cries. However, after rescuing his friend, he causes chaos in the kitchen by eating the larder, feasting on the food, soaking her sheets with mustard oil, breaking the cutlery, and damaging the kitchen. The fable concludes with the same refrain, as the cat tells the cock, "When we are back at home at last, / Learn a lesson from the past. / Do things, if you would, my way" (323).

Will they live happily ever after? Has the cock learned his lesson and heeded his wise friend's advice? Unlike the Ukrainian fable, which ends with all the foxes dead, this version keeps them alive. Given its history of preying on cocks, will the cat rescue his friend again, even if it may not always succeed? While a fable teaches a moral lesson, Seth's adaptation subverts this basic criterion. The cock needs to learn, but his repeated near-death encounters

with the fox suggest he may keep repeating the same actions and, consequently, never learn. This indeterminacy, arising from the circularity of action, leaves readers uncertain, hinting at an endless cycle with no resolution. Such complexity is characteristic of postmodern literature, and Seth's retelling gives it a renewed form.

In "The Goat and the Ram", Seth's adaptation closely follows the original Ukrainian fable, in which a couple banishes the Goat and the Ram for gluttony. The two best friends packed their belongings into a sack and left the farm. Continuing their journey, they came across a wolf's head, which they put in the sack, and went on, only to end up in a forest full of wolves. The rest of the tale recounts how the two outwit the wolves and live happily ever after ("The Goat and the Ram"). Seth's recension adds complexity by showing that the two animals brought the misfortune upon themselves. He deterritorialises these tales by introducing additional animals to the farm, including exotic species such as the zebra and the peacock, which are not native to Eastern Europe. Other animals at the farm are uniquely gifted, such as the sow that plays the piano and the gosling who is a weather forecaster. In contrast, the Ram and the Goat are gluttons who devour food from the farm and the kitchen and have no useful skills (Seth 324).

Unlike Aesopian fables, this fable does not depict the triumph of virtue over evil. While the Ram and the Goat are vulnerable to predators outside the farm, they are also filled with vice, which leads to their expulsion. A chance encounter brings them to a wolf's head, which the resourceful Goat puts in the sack of belongings. Unlike a traditional fable, there is no clear distinction between the wolves or the farm owners as evil and the Ram and the Goat as good; instead, these two animals embody the modern dictum of survival of the fittest, primarily the most resourceful. The fable emphasises the role of chance, as it is chance that leads them to find a wolf's head. Seth subverts prescriptive gender roles by giving agency to the Goat, a female who uses her wit and bravery to save herself and the timid Ram from being eaten alive

by the wolves. Elements of chance, female agency, complex characters, and an ambiguous moral tone give this fable a contemporary feel. It concludes with a picture of the two living on the fat of the land in perfect harmony, never having to worry about food or predators. The fable does not teach us any moral values, and it ends by underscoring that having enough food to eat and staying alive are key to a good life today.

The final two fables are the poet's original creations. "The Frog and the Nightingale" echoes Oscar Wilde's "The Nightingale and the Rose". This tale depicts a heartless world of commercial exploitation, where talentless bullies like the Frog thrive by preying on gullible artists like the Nightingale. The Nightingale is foolish and vain enough to heed the Frog's advice; once she becomes accustomed to public adulation, she loses perspective and, in a poignant scene, dies singing. The Frog monetises the Nightingale's voice to the point that she literally drops dead. Seth might be hinting at his own writing career and the pitfalls of seeking validation from critics and readers. The Frog isn't entirely wrong when he says, "Far too nervous, far too tense, /Far too prone to influence, /Well, poor bird-she should have known/That your song must be your own" (Seth 336).

No one mourns the Nightingale's death, nor protests the Frog's role in her untimely demise. Now, Bingle Bog is left to the croaks of the tone-deaf, remorseless Frog, who will live off the profits of a dead artist. Although the fable warns against flatterers, the victims receive no justice, and the criminals go unpunished. Those who profit from the commercialisation of art are the clear winners. This story resonates today in films, music, and the arts, highlighting the exploitation of artists, the fleeting nature of fame, and the relentless pursuit of perfection at the expense of one's well-being — where the weak and the naïve perish and the self-serving villains thrive. Justice, of course, remains a distant illusion.

The "Elephant and the Tragopan" is the most overtly political and may be read as an ecologically conscious fable illustrating humanity's insatiable greed, which leads to

environmental destruction. The fable may have drawn inspiration from various ecological movements in India and elsewhere. Set in Bingle Valley, it is a strong indictment of unsustainable "development" models. Here, the "beast" is humanity rather than the actual beasts who live in Bingle Valley. The plot centres on two friends, an Elephant and a Tragopan (a Himalayan pheasant), who are alarmed by rumours that Man plans to dam the valley's stream, flood the land, clear the woods, and destroy their habitat (Seth 339). The following week, the *Bingle Telegraph* reports that the "Great Bigshot", the pompous Padma Shri Bhushan Gobardhun, and his Man-Council plan to dam the stream to build a reservoir. They also intend to blast a tunnel to ensure a continuous water supply for the town. An emergency meeting is convened, and it is decided that all animals will try to persuade the "Great Bigshot", the pompous Padma Shri Bhushan Gobardhun, to reconsider.

During the meeting, we realise how beastly Man is. The irony of our deification of animals is not lost on them: "Sometimes he worships us as Gods…/ Or fashions fables, myths, and stories/ To celebrate our deeds and glories" (Seth 342). A few days later, the protesters marched towards the town, crying "Long live Bingladesh", "Redress our sad and sorry tale"! (346). Based on the Tragopans' data, we see that the town does not require additional water. Sufficient water is present, but it is diverted to the homes of the powerful, and much of the remainder is lost through rusty, unmaintained pipes. The Bigshot shoots down all suggestions because, in Man's world, "The operative word in Votes/ And next to that comes Rupee-notes" (354). As tensions rise, the Tragopan is killed. The Bigshot also uses the death to gain political mileage, arranging a full state funeral for the bird. There are many conflicting opinions and intellectual debates in the media about the water crisis and the Tragopan's death. It remains uncertain whether Bingle Valley will survive or be destroyed by Man.

The fable is a sharp critique of bureaucratic indifference and ecological devastation, including the loss of natural habitat, and it echoes indigenous environmental movements. As it

stands, any story of Man versus Nature is not open-ended, for we will not mend our ways. Nature is slowly reclaiming her space through untimely rains, drought, pestilence, and disasters beyond our control. Clearly, nature will triumph in the end.

Conclusion

The central paradox today is that, despite widespread claims of civilisation, human rights, environmental protection, and the rule of law, ethics have, in practice, been devalued. In the public sphere, utilitarianism and materialism are privileged over all other considerations, while in the private sphere, self-interest and ambition dominate human relationships. Ironically, virtues such as loyalty, hard work, empathy, and friendship have become obsolete. As Seth's fables show, ideals of the past may end up harming oneself. His fables offer a comprehensive account of the perils of modern life and its unstable value system. They are indeed modern fables, consonant with the contemporary worldview.

Vikram Seth's adaptation of these ancient fables serves as a literary resurrection of the original texts. He does not merely reproduce the fables but revitalises them through a delightful sequence of rhyming couplets, incorporating onomatopoeia, alliteration, consonance, name-parody, good-humoured upbraiding, warmth, and a lack of overt moralising, thereby making the text a standalone work. He allocates equal focus to each character rather than solely to the plot, unlike traditional fables, which makes them more complex.

The original didactic tone gives way to a more nuanced, profound exploration of human psychology and the social and political intricacies of modern life. This marks a significant departure from the earlier fables. The use of open-ended themes, verbal wordplay, and a sense of levity indicates a postmodern approach to the text rather than an ancient tale. As Walter Benjamin noted, translation bestows an afterlife upon texts. Not only do great texts survive through translation, but they are also renewed and revitalised in the process, gaining relevance

across different historical periods. In this way, Vikram Seth's *Beastly Tales from Here and There* endows the ancient fables with a delightful afterlife and contemporary relevance.

Works Cited:

Benjamin, Walter. *Selected Writings, Volume I. 1913-1926*. Edited by Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings, Harvard University Press, 2002.

Blackham, *H.J. Fable as Literature*. The Athlone Press Ltd., 1985.

Comstock, Frannie, "Chinese Zodiac". *Encyclopædia Britannica.* https://www.britannica.com/topic/Chinese-zodiac. Accessed 11 June 2026.

Lal, P. *Transcreations: Seven Essays on the Art of Transcreation*. Calcutta Writers Workshop, 1996.

Rouse, W. H. D., translator. "No. 208: Sumsumara-Jataka." *The Jatakas: Stories of the Buddha's Former Births*, edited by Edward B. Cowell, vol. 2, Cambridge University Press, 1895, pp. 110-112. *Internet Sacred Text Archive*, https://sacred-texts.com/bud/j2/j2061.htm. Accessed 10 June 2026.

Seth, Vikram. *The Collected Poems*. Penguin Books,1999.

" The Eagle and the Beetle" *The Aesop for Children*. https://read.gov/aesop/023.html. Accessed 10 June 2026

"The Cat, the Cock, and the Fox: Ukrainian Fable". https://www.worldoftales.com/European_folktales/Ukrainian_folktale_18.html#gsc.tab=0. Accessed 10 June 2026

"The Bug and the Poor Flea". https://talesofpanchatantra.com/the-bug-and-the-poor-flea. Accessed 10 June 2029