

Critical Analysis – The Tale of Melon City by Vikram Seth

The Tale of Melon City is a humorous, satirical narrative poem that presents a seemingly ridiculous story to expose serious flaws in governance, justice and public responsibility.

Satire on governance: Vikram Seth mocks rulers who exercise authority without wisdom or accountability. The King is called “just and placid”, yet his decisions are irrational and impulsive.

Blind justice: The poem presents justice as a mechanical process in which the authorities are more concerned with finding someone to punish than with discovering the truth. The chain of blame—builder → workers → masons → architect → King—shows the absurdity of such a system.

Irony: The greatest irony is that the King, who demands punishment for the faulty arch,

ultimately becomes the victim of his own system. His attempt to establish justice leads to his own downfall.

Absurdity and humour: The exaggerated events, such as the execution of the King and the eventual crowning of a melon, create comic effects. However, the humour conceals a serious criticism of irrational political systems.

Public apathy: The citizens do not seem concerned about who rules them. Their only concern is that they should enjoy peace and liberty. Their passive acceptance of a melon as King highlights how easily people may accept authority without questioning it.

Tradition over reason: The ministers follow established procedures mechanically. Even after the King dies, they simply follow another arbitrary rule to choose a successor. This shows how traditions can become meaningless when separated from common sense.

The melon as a symbol: The melon represents the meaninglessness and interchangeability of rulers. If a completely unsuitable object can become King and the citizens remain satisfied, Seth makes us question whether the ruler has any real significance when people themselves remain passive.

Seth uses satire, irony, exaggeration, absurd humour and simple narrative verse. The light, almost folktale-like style makes the political criticism entertaining rather than preachy.

The poem is far more than a funny story about a melon becoming king. Beneath its humour lies a sharp criticism of irrational leadership, blind obedience, meaningless laws and passive citizens. Seth suggests that justice requires reason and accountability, not merely strict adherence to rules. The final image of a melon ruling the city is both hilarious and disturbing because the system continues unchanged.

Symbols in The Tale of Melon City – Vikram Seth

1. The Melon – Symbolises absurd and meaningless leadership. A melon becoming king shows that the identity or ability of the ruler becomes irrelevant when people blindly accept authority.

2. The King – Symbolises irresponsible and foolish rulers who claim to be just but make decisions without proper reasoning.

3. The Arch – Symbolises faulty systems and institutions. Its collapse begins the chain of blame and exposes the weakness of the entire governing system.

4. The Noose – Symbolises blind and mechanical justice. The authorities are more interested in finding someone to punish than in understanding who is actually responsible.

5. The Ministers – Symbolise bureaucracy and blind obedience. They follow rules mechanically

instead of using common sense.

6. The Citizens – Symbolise passive masses who value peace and freedom but do not actively question their rulers or the system.

7. The Law – Symbolises rigid adherence to rules without reason. The law becomes more important than justice itself

3-Mark Questions

1. The poem presents justice as a process of finding someone to blame rather than finding the truth. Justify this statement with reference to the chain of blame in the poem.

2. The King's desire to appear "just" ultimately exposes his lack of wisdom. Support this observation with suitable incidents from the poem.

3. The citizens' reaction to the new ruler reveals their attitude towards governance. Analyse this attitude in the context of the poem.

4. The poem uses humour to communicate

serious political criticism. Explain how one incident creates humour while simultaneously exposing a flaw in the system.

5. The ministers follow rules even when those rules produce absurd results. Evaluate how this reflects the dangers of blind obedience.

6-Mark Questions

1. “The real target of the poem is not the melon but the system that allows a melon to become king.” Critically examine this statement with reference to the poem.

2. When justice is separated from common sense, it can become absurd.” Discuss this idea using the sequence of events leading to the King’s execution.

3. The ending of the poem is humorous on the surface but deeply satirical underneath. Analyse how the crowning of the melon strengthens the central message of the poem.